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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE STUDY OF EVALUATIVE INQUIRY WITHIN A BUSINESS CONTEXT:  
SOCIAL LEARNING PROCESSES, TEAM-LEVEL INFRASTRUCTURE,  
AND GUIDELINES FOR PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

BY

MARIE E PAYDON

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 2019

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, LeEtta Carter, who 16 years ago provided me with a candle inside a small box and a handwritten note that said “*Just, as this little candle, when lit brightens up a dark room may you continue to, with your special gifts of knowledge, compassion and persistence, also bring lite and life to all areas and circumstances you are led (to) into.*” You have always believed in me and in my ability to accomplish things greater than myself.



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## ABSTRACT

This three-article dissertation presents complementary perspectives on applying an Evaluative Inquiry (EI) within a business setting. Evaluative Inquiry is an inquiry model of organizational learning which blends evaluation and social learning processes to promote individual, team, and organizational learning and occurs within a broader organizational infrastructure. The first article details findings from a case study of participants engaged in EI, exploring how they engaged in social learning processes and how these enabled individual, team, and organizational learning outcomes. The second article details findings from the same case study but examines how engaging in the EI process generated and promoted infrastructural components (e.g., culture, leadership, communication, and systems and structures) at the team rather than organizational level. The third article describes my experience in implementing EI and provides recommendations to learning professionals and practitioners in using the EI process in their own setting.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **The Origins of my Dissertation Research**

This dissertation represents my experiences with organizational learning, evaluation, and implementation. My work on this topic has been ongoing for three and a half years. My interest in, passion for, and journey through this work began long before beginning the Curriculum and Instruction program at Loyola in the fall of 2011; it is grounded in my practices as an instructional designer and training manager. The 14 years I have spent designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating curricula and learning programs for adult learners within a corporate environment has heavily influenced this work. My time as a student at Loyola expanded my thinking beyond my formal education and experience in instructional design, resulting in changes to my own approach to training and development. It has propelled me into the role of thought leader in individual, team, and organizational learning, as well as in designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating informal socially-based learning practices within my organization. This journey has reinforced my interest in and commitment to building and implementing curricula that supports adult learners and organizations beyond formal learning and individual instruction, supporting them instead from a more holistic learning perspective that promotes team, organizational, and individual learning.

When I began my program at Loyola, I knew my dissertation would center on some aspect of evaluation and organizational learning. I was unlike many of the students in the program, as others worked within an educational versus a corporate setting. I was surrounded by teachers and principals; listening to their stories, I did not hear one similar to my own. I remember second-guessing my choice of this program, but then I met Dr. David Ensminger during my first dissertation seminar class in the fall of 2011 and my thinking changed. I explained my interests and background to David and immediately recognized that we both had a background in business and industry as well as in instructional design. He was an experienced evaluator, and I realized I could learn a lot from him regarding theory and practice.

Given the substantial scope of the field of evaluation and organizational learning, I needed to narrow my topic. This happened when Dr. Ensminger introduced me to an organizational learning and evaluation model called Evaluative Inquiry (EI) (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) during the fall of 2011. After reading this article, I was excited about the potential to apply it within my own organization. Although it was still early in the program and, being the analytical person that I am, I wanted to explore a few more options prior to committing. After taking several more classes at Loyola and searching for more ideas, I realized that Evaluative Inquiry was the right topic for me. It was a topic that I was interested in and passionate about. Its implementation could also benefit my organization and add value to the gap in research in applying the Evaluative Inquiry model within a business setting.



Much of the dissertation process began through my independent study course which Dr. Ensminger educated me on and encouraged me to do. Over the course of three semesters, I engaged in an in-depth review of the literature, created an annotated bibliography of over 50 resources, completed an independent research study, and analyzed preliminary findings. This validated that the topic area and focus of my dissertation was really of interest to me.

Given time constraints for completing the degree program, Dr. Ensminger and I decided that the independent research case study that we had been collaboratively conducting could serve as my dissertation work. Specifically, we discussed that I could use a three-article dissertation format where I could develop three stand-alone yet complementary articles on applying the Evaluative Inquiry model within a business context. I could use the same data and insights gathered from participants and analyze it from three different angles or segments of the EI model.

Using this format shaped the nature of my dissertation study in that it prompted me to: explore the social learning processes that represent the forms of communication at the center that drive learning within the model; examine how engaging in the Evaluative Inquiry process created the existence of infrastructural components (e.g., culture, leadership, communication, and systems and structures) at the team level; and to include a piece for learning professionals and practitioners which describes my experiences and recommendations for using the Evaluative Inquiry process in their own setting.

Using the three-article format is practical for someone working within business and industry. Speaking as a learning and development practitioner, I can say that I would

not take the time to read a large dissertation in order to understand how to apply it within my organization. The small article format is a more viable approach because the articles are shorter in length and the content is more digestible. However, I recently discovered through sharing some of my preliminary work in Evaluative Inquiry at two conferences, American Evaluation Association - AEA (October 2017) and Learning Solutions (March 2018), that practitioners were more interested in the application of research. During the AEA conference I had two 20-minute segments to present on my work in EI. The first segment was dedicated to the social learning processes of EI and was empirical in nature; the second, more practical in nature, was dedicated to sharing outcomes and associated lessons learned, recommendations, and guidelines. During the first presentation there was silence and a few participants even left the room. During the second presentation, participants were engaged and asked many questions related to applying Evaluative Inquiry. This confirmed for me that I had made the correct decision in writing a practitioner-based article in addition to the two empirical articles.

I am indebted to Dr. Ensminger and my other committee members, Dr. Leanne Kallemeyn and Dr. John Mattox II, for their guidance, mentorship, constructive feedback, and support on my journey as a doctoral student. Engaging in this program and dissertation process has transformed my original student-based mindset to that of professional, thought-leader, researcher, and scholar in curriculum and instruction.

### **Three-Article Dissertation Structure**

My dissertation is presented using a three-article format, consisting of three independent yet congruent articles. This format provides varying and complementary

perspectives on the application of the Evaluative Inquiry model within a business setting. In addition, it offers a variety of contributions to the field that will inform the thinking of scholars, researchers, and practitioners.

### **Article 1: The Engine of Evaluative Inquiry: Social Learning Processes**

The first article, an empirical piece, presents the findings from a case study on exploring the use of the Evaluative Inquiry model (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) within a U.S. based global learning department of an international corporation. This piece focuses specifically on the social learning processes that are central to the Evaluative Inquiry model and represent the forms of communication that drive learning within the model. The findings identify and describe how engaging in the social learning processes of the Evaluative Inquiry model facilitated and promoted meaningful individual and team learning outcomes among the learning manager participants, as well as indicating that organizational learning outcomes began to emerge related to the focus of the inquiry (i.e., needs assessments). Through the lens of transformational learning theory and adult learning and development (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000), this piece investigates how engaging in the social learning processes of Evaluative Inquiry promotes and engages adults in meaning-making that results not only in the accumulation of knowledge, but epistemological shifts in mindset and changes in behavior.

The intended audience for this piece includes organizational learning researchers as well as learning professionals and practitioners such as curriculum developers, leaders in training and adult learning and development, and human performance improvement specialists who are interested in examining a case where adults engaged in social learning

processes of Evaluative Inquiry that successfully enabled individual, team, and organizational learning outcomes. This piece contributes to the literature by studying the application of the Evaluative Inquiry model within a business organization where there has been limited empirical study within this context. It also provides a more complex understanding of social learning processes, particularly that dialogue serves as the main communication process through which other social learning processes occur.

## **Article 2: Creating Evaluative Inquiry Infrastructural Components at the Team Level**

The second article is also an empirical piece. It presents findings from my dissertation research, including a case study conducted to explore the use of the Evaluative Inquiry model (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) within a US-based global learning department within an international corporation. It focuses specifically on four infrastructural components (e.g., culture, leadership, communication, and systems and structures) of the Evaluative Inquiry model and how engaging in the Evaluative Inquiry process can create these components at the team level. The findings identify and describe how engaging in the Evaluative Inquiry process created certain conditions for learning manager participants at the team level and could be associated with the more organizationally-based descriptions of the four infrastructural components of the Evaluative Inquiry model. Findings also indicated that these components can be generated at the team level despite their presence or absence within the broader organization. By viewing the infrastructural components of the Evaluative Inquiry model through a team level versus an organizational level lens, this piece explores the capacity

of the Evaluative Inquiry process to create team-level infrastructural conditions that can be associated with team-level performance and success.

The intended audience for this piece includes organizational learning researchers and learning professionals and practitioners such as curriculum developers, leaders in training and adult learning and development, and human performance improvement specialists who are interested in examining a case where adults were engaged in an Evaluative Inquiry process that was successful in creating conditions and qualities needed to enable positive team-level performance and success. There has been limited application of the Evaluative Inquiry model within a business setting, so this piece will contribute to the literature by providing empirical study within this context. Additionally, exploring infrastructural components as they occur within the Evaluative Inquiry process rather than outside of it provides a more complex understanding of infrastructure; this understanding can be used to justify a new conceptualization of the outside of the Evaluative Inquiry model.

### **Article 3: Applying Evaluative Inquiry: Experience and Recommendations from the Field**

The third article represents an illustration of our experience implementing the Evaluative Inquiry model (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) within our own organization as well as our recommendations for implementing EI. I view this piece as my contribution to other learning professionals and practitioners who are interested in using the Evaluative Inquiry process in their own setting.

The decision to take a practitioner-versus empirically-focused approach for the third article comes from my experience as a practitioner and the recognition that practitioners may be more interested in the application of the model than understanding empirical elements of the social learning processes or infrastructure development. In writing this article, my intent was to make it accessible to practitioners. This required considerations such as article length, reference tables and tools, and a narrative style of writing.

This piece introduces practitioners to the Evaluative Inquiry model and provides an overview of its structural and social learning components. It tells a story of applying it within our context; from this, we present four principles that can help practitioners in the promotion, planning, implementation, and maintenance of Evaluative Inquiry. Finally, this article provides four suggestions that are important to consider when implementing Evaluative Inquiry but are not part of the formal Evaluative Inquiry model.

### **Concluding Piece**

In addition to these three articles that emphasize different aspects of Evaluative Inquiry, I also incorporate a brief concluding piece that explains the relationship between the three articles and describe how they offer varying yet complementary perspectives on applying Evaluative Inquiry within a business setting. I also include a reflective narrative that describes how I was shaped as a student, researcher, practitioner, and a person as a result of completing a doctoral program and designing and conducting my dissertation research. This narrative intends to generate new insights with regards to my practices and the impact these had on me personally and professionally, as well as to share my

story so others can see my journey. Embedded within this narrative is a strong reflexive component focused on how I have grown and how the events and experiences surrounding my dissertation work have shaped my professional and personal identity.

## CHAPTER II

### ARTICLE I: THE ENGINE OF EVALUATIVE INQUIRY: SOCIAL LEARNING PROCESSES

#### **Abstract**

This study explored the use of Evaluative Inquiry (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) within a US-based global learning department of an international corporation. Specifically, it explored the social learning processes that represent the forms of communication that drive learning within the model: dialogue; reflection; asking questions; and identifying and challenging values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge. Results indicated that social learning processes promoted individual and team learning, as well as providing the beginnings of organizational learning. In addition, results confirmed that dialogue serves as the central process through which all other social learning processes occur. A new conceptualization of the center of the Evaluative Inquiry model is presented.

#### **Introduction**

Learning organizations strive to promote three distinct forms of learning, individual, team, and organizational. While organizations may successfully engage in individual learning, these same organizations often fail to promote team and organizational learning. Organizations miss the mark with team and organizational learning because their training and development approaches focus too much on the



individual level of learning. Organizations tend to emphasize traditional event-based training models that focus on static, individualistic, and task-based learning rather than a continuous process of learning and improving performance (Bersin, 2008; Bersin & Associates, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; Deloitte Development LLC, 2015; Gavin, 1993; Pollock, Jefferson, & Wick, 2015; Preskill, 1994).

Today's knowledge economy necessitates dynamic, situational, and team-based learning interventions (Stewart, 1997; Switzer, 2008). Organizational learning models offer a way to address the needs of the knowledge economy because they drive continuous growth and improvement and promote individual, team, and organizational learning. Specifically, organizational learning models provide an agile and fluid approach to facilitating learning and performance through collaborative continuous learning. This shift can occur by engaging individuals in social learning processes that are fundamental to driving team and organizational learning, performance, and change (Preskill & Torres, 1999; Raelin, 2000; Senge, 1990; Sessa & London, 2006; Watkins & Marsick, 1996, as cited by Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). Learning organizations engage in social learning processes naturally and across all levels of the organization. To foster the learning organizations, it is important to understand how organizations can use approaches that foster social learning processes and how these approaches drive the explicit use of these social learning processes at individual, team and organizational levels.

Social learning processes promote individual, team, and organizational learning by eliciting changes in behaviors and mindsets that are fundamental to how adults learn

and develop (Taylor et al., 2000). In fact, many theorists have agreed that enabling social learning processes are fundamental to driving team and organizational learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999; Raelin, 2000; Senge, 1990; Sessa & London, 2006; Watkins & Marsick, 1996, as cited by Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). Along with promoting learning, social learning processes facilitate individual, team, and organizational performance.

In an examination of evaluation practices applied to organizational learning, Torres and Preskill (2002) explained that driving organizational learning requires a focus on social learning processes that enable process use. Process use is defined as “the cognitive, behavioral, program, and organizational changes resulting, either directly or indirectly, from engagement in the evaluation process and learning to think evaluatively” (Patton, 2008, p. 109). It has been found to promote learning, particularly transformational learning, within organizations at the individual, team, and organizational levels (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Jenlink, 1994; Owen & Lambert, 1995; Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 1996, as cited by Preskill & Torres, 2000).

Preskill and Torres (1999a, 1999b) present one organizational learning model called Evaluative Inquiry (EI) where the interaction between social learning processes and systematic evaluation activities are central to promoting individual, team, and organizational learning. Specifically, EI fosters learning by engaging people in social learning processes of dialogue, reflection, asking questions, and identification and clarification of knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge while systematically evaluating an organizational problem or need. It is through EI that evaluation and

learning merge, as learning processes inform evaluation and evaluation processes inform learning.

Social learning processes have the capacity to promote individual, team, and organizational learning. Despite the potential of Evaluative Inquiry to drive organizational learning, performance, and change, there is surprisingly little scholarship on the use of the EI model.

A first-level analysis revealed 166 articles that cited the Evaluative Inquiry Model (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) within the social science, business and management, psychology, medicine, computer science, decision science, engineering, and environmental science fields. Much of this work was theoretical and conceptual in nature, introduced newer evaluation approaches that extended upon the EI model, or represented review or magazine-type articles rather than empirical research.

A second analysis was conducted on the 166 articles to identify those that directly related to organizational learning within any field. This reduced the original 166 articles to 43; of those 43 articles, only 22 referenced Evaluative Inquiry Model in relationship to other components of evaluation and organizational learning. Twenty of the articles did not focus on the application of the EI Model. Rather, they addressed areas that: extended upon the EI model, such as Evaluative Capacity Building (Bourgeois, Hart, Townsend, & Gagné, 2011; Hoole & Patterson, 2008; Taylor-Powell & Boyd, 2008) and process use (Preskill, Zuckerman, & Matthews, 2003; Russ-Eft, Atwood, & Eggherman, 2002); presented high level definitions and descriptions of concepts associated with Evaluative Inquiry (Hopkins & Hyde, 2002; Kuznia, Kerno Jr., & Gilley, 2010; Miller, 2010;

Piggot-Irvine, 2010; Shulha, Whitmore, Cousins, Gilbert, & al Hudib, 2016; Taut, 2007); and described EI within the context of the broader field of evaluation (Kerman, Freundlich, Lee, & Brenner, 2012; Kuchеров & Manokhina, 2017; Massey & Hurley, 2001; Neumann, Robson, & Sloan, 2018; Tyson & Ward, 2004) and organizational learning, capacity, and change (Elkjaer & Brandi, 2018; Gilley, Dixon, & Gilley, 2008); Maheshwari & Vohra, 2018; Nafukho, Graham, & Muyia, 2009).

Two of the 22 articles utilized the Evaluative Inquiry Model as part of the research. Ensminger, Kallemyn, Rempert, Wade, and Polanin (2015) conducted a retrospective study using EI as a theoretical model for data analysis to examine the role of the evaluation coach utilizing social learning processes to promote evaluation capacity building within a non-profit organization. Parsons (2009) provides an article that references 24 instances where EI was used within a community college but provides no data on the application of the EI model, focusing instead on an overview prospective of applying the model for practitioners. Although these two articles utilized EI, no literature was found that empirically studied the direct application of the Evaluative Inquiry Model in any setting.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the application of the Evaluative Inquiry Model within a business organization. This article focuses explicitly on the social learning processes of EI. Specifically, it focused on how participants (learning managers) within one learning department in a global US-based organization engaged in social learning processes and how these enabled individual, team, and organizational

learning outcomes. The following research questions were used to explore Evaluative Inquiry: which social learning processes were present and which social learning processes were associated with individual, team, and organizational learning outcomes.

### **Relevant Literature**

This literature review presents the foundation of adult learning and development by addressing four foundational concepts of adult development and learning. It then presents how engaging in social learning processes engage adults in meaning-making and contributes to individual, team, and organizational learning. Finally, it provides an overview of the Evaluative Inquiry model.

#### **Adult Development and Learning**

Transformational learning occurs when meaning-making results in epistemological changes and not just changes in behaviors or the accumulation of knowledge (Kegan, 2000). Four foundational concepts of adult development and learning drive changes at the epistemological level (Taylor et al., 2000).

The first foundational concept centers on the idea that people develop as they socially interact within their environment (Taylor et al., 2000). Organizations can construct environments that promote or hinder social interactions. Thus, the nature of adult learning and development is enhanced or hindered based on the characteristics of the social context of an organization.

The second foundational concept is that development depends on a series of iterations between differentiation and integration that occur within the adult mind (Taylor et al., 2000). Differentiation begins when an adult cannot fit an event into their existing

frame of reference because it represents a challenge to their existing knowledge, values, beliefs, and/or prior experiences, creating a state of cognitive dissonance. At the same time this interruption opens a channel in the adult mind that allows for integration of the new event to begin. This interplay between differentiation and integration can result in “accommodation” if an adult is able to integrate the event into a new frame of reference. Essentially, it is the dialectical nature of this process, a disconnect between what someone thinks they know versus what they are being presented with, that creates disruption or cognitive dissonance that can promote learning.

The third concept is that, for development to occur from the first two concepts, adults must mentally reframe their experiences (Taylor et al., 2000). The process of reframing contributes to changes in epistemology, what is considered transformational learning (Taylor et. al., 2000). Reframing and then development occur as individuals move across five dimensions: 1) Towards Knowing As A Dialogical Process, 2) Toward A Dialogical Relationship To Oneself, 3) Toward Being A Continuous Learner, 4) Toward Self-Agency And Self-Authorship, and 5) Toward Connection With Others (pp. 32-33). These dimensions involve actions that are connected to driving differentiation and integration that lead to reframing in adult learners. Individuals and teams actively engage in inquiry and open dialogue and debate in order to surface assumptions, perspectives, positions, actions, and ideas such that reframing and then new meaning can emerge. This disequilibrium is embraced as a learning experience where both self and others reflect, question, engage in feedback cycles, and seek new meaning as part of the learning process (Taylor et al., 2000).

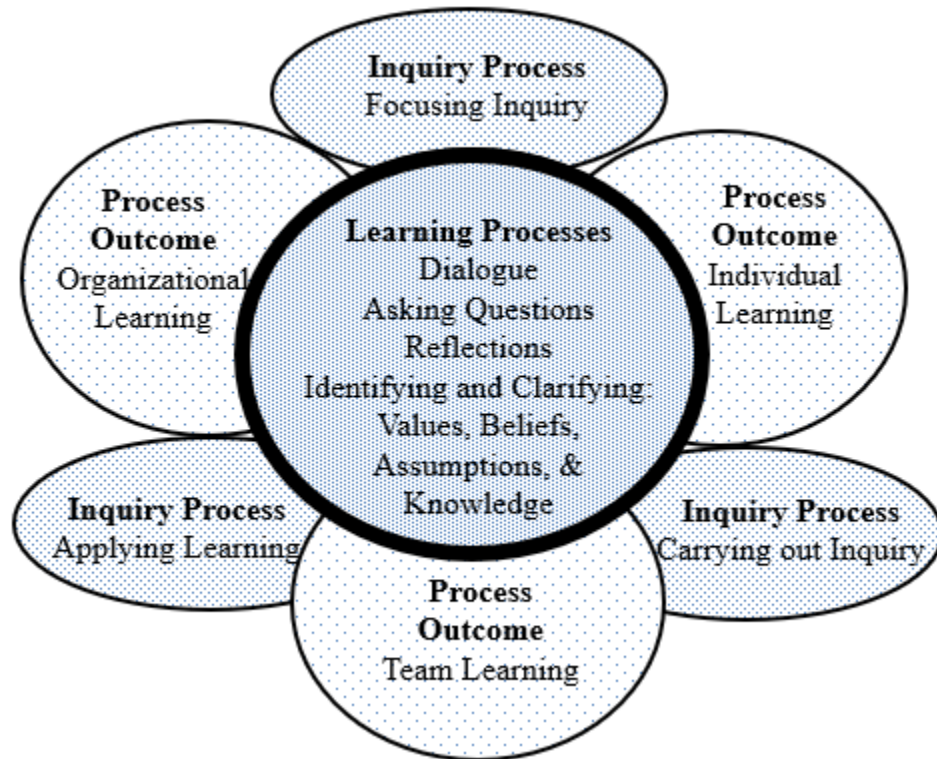
The fourth foundational concept is that adults experience the process of development uniquely and individually, and the process of development is described as variable rather than uniform in nature (Taylor et al., 2000). This impacts learning because not everyone is in the same developmental place. Learning approaches need to honor the variable nature of adult learning to promote epistemological shifts.

The four concepts of adult development align with views of meaningful learning and transformational learning. These perspectives suggest that individual learning occurs as a result of epistemological changes in the learner's mindset. Specifically, the learner begins to question their ways of understanding – their knowledge, beliefs, values, and assumptions. The social learning processes that promote epistemological changes on the individual level occur through relationships with others. As groups engage in the social learning processes together, shifts in group's understanding reflect team learning (Kegan, 2000).

### **Evaluative Inquiry**

Evaluative Inquiry (EI) (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) provides a model for organizations to effectively drive organizational learning by blending practices inherent to both learning and evaluation. This approach uses three inquiry processes (e.g., focusing inquiry, carrying out inquiry, and applying learning) as the framework of the approach. In addition, the approach engages participants in social learning processes (e.g., dialogue, reflection, asking questions, and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge) when carrying out evaluation practices in order to promote individual, team, and organizational learning (Preskill, 1994; Preskill & Torres, 1999a,

1999b). Figure 1 is a representation of an adapted Evaluative Inquiry model. It was adapted to show the explicit focus on the social learning processes of the EI model by highlighting the inner circle and removing the organizational infrastructure components (i.e., Systems and Structures, Communications, Leaderships and Culture).



*Figure 1.* Adapted Evaluative Inquiry Model

The EI model is situated in the perspective that learning is socially constructed; and that as participants engage in the social learning processes during each inquiry process, learning is constructed at the individual, team, and organizational levels.

Preskill and Torres (1999a, 1999b) noted that there is no pre-specified order in which social learning processes occur; they are dynamic and ever-changing in response to their environment. The iterative engagement in social learning during the inquiry processes



helps generate cycles of continuous learning for the individual, team, and organization. Although this occurs within the broader context of the organization, the purpose of this study is to focus on the social learning processes that are at the center of the model and how they influence learning outcomes.

Preskill and Torres (1999a) describe Evaluative Inquiry as an organizational learning model that is based on the idea that organizations are developing, growing, and operating in a “dynamic, unstable, [and] unpredictable environment” and that this requires a learning approach that is “socially situated and is mediated through participants’ previous knowledge and experiences” and results in new information needed for “decision making” and “action” while at the same time surfacing information that might require additional questioning and debate (p. 44).

### **Social Learning Processes**

Learning requires social context in its strategies and approaches. Social learning processes within these social contexts drive learning beyond the individual, first into teams and then into the organization as a whole. Learning, performance, and change initiatives that utilize social learning processes see learning and action occurring at team and organizational levels more so than when non-social learning approaches are used. Literature supports that organizational learning occurs when individuals and teams engage in social learning processes such as dialogue, reflection, asking questions, and identifying and challenging values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge (Preskill & Torres, 1999, Raelin, 2000; Senge, 1990; Sessa & London, 2006; Watkins & Marsick, 1996, as cited by Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009).

Preskill and Torres (1999a, 1999b) identify dialogue as a fundamental social learning process, because without it, individuals, teams, and organizations stay stagnant in their own ways of knowing and doing. It is through dialogue that individuals seek first to understand something in an open, honest, and non-judgmental way, as such dialogue centers on discovery rather than argumentation. Dialogue is often described as an emancipatory process that can drive meaning making for both individuals and teams. Through dialogue, problems can be unearthed and openly examined so that clarity and new understanding can emerge (Mezirow, 2000). Dialogue helps to uncover information which facilitates shared meaning and new understandings about organizational culture, politics, processes, and goals (Preskill & Torres, 1999b). By engaging in dialogue, participants are essentially co-creating their learning. Results of this co-creation can take the form of identified barriers/enablers to learning, operational intelligence and action, updated or new policies, processes, and/or procedures, improved relationships, and new solutions/ideas. Through co-creation and dialogue, individuals and teams develop shared meaning on topics of examination.

Asking questions is a critical social learning process used successfully within the field of management studies (Bolten, 2001; Kessels, 2001; Laurie, 2001; Roy, 2001) and is fundamental to learning at individual, team, and organizational levels. Questions help individuals, teams, and organizations to interrupt their preconceived notions around a topic so that improved problem-solving and deeper levels of learning might result. Preskill and Torres (1999a) describe asking questions as being key to identifying organizational issues, recognizing employees' prior knowledge, cultivating a culture of

discovery, and challenging organizational knowledge and understandings. However, questions should be asked such that they have epistemological purpose. Mitchell (2006) described Socratic instruction as typically not involving the use of fact-based questions, but the use of more open questions that might not always have clear answers. These questions are used to strategically unearth and openly examine problems in a participatory and semi-structured way. Asking questions serves as one process that can drive epistemological mindset shift (Taylor et al., 2000) or organizational learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999a). Engaging in iterations of question and answer through dialogue is fundamental to shifting changes in epistemological mindset in individuals. Asking questions prioritizes thought before action leading to not only better learning, but to increased effectiveness and efficiency in problem-solving and decision-making at team and organizational levels (Preskill & Torres, 1999a).

As a social learning process, reflection has the capacity to surface and engage individuals in deep and holistic contemplation on their own and others' beliefs, values, assumptions, and knowledge around a particular topic and in doing so challenges preconceived notions (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). Reflection and critical reflection elicit changes in mental models and epistemological views which is fundamental to transformational learning (Taylor et al., 2000). In this view, reflection is defined as a "deep approach to learning" that is dedicated to "thinking about how and what one is learning" and includes "watching one's own process as a learner, questioning one's assumptions (old and new), checking out the new 'knowledge' as it is created, and

seeing oneself, one's past choices, one's future possibilities, as central to what is being learned" (Marton, Dall'Alba, & Beaty, 1993 as cited by Taylor et al., 2000, p. 26).

Reflection challenges individuals to examine "what they say" compared to "what they do" (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, p. 47). Essentially, it challenges individuals' "theory-in-use" (Argyis & Schön, 1996, p. 13). Reflection requires the individual to question what underlies a particular situation in order to surface "epistemic or psychological presuppositions" that were previously hidden from view such that transformation might occur (Mezirow, 1991, p. 105, as cited by Taylor, 2006, p. 80). It has the capacity to break down "self-confirming loops" (Brookfield, 1998, as cited by Taylor et al., 2000) or "single-loops" which result in minimal changes to strategies and assumptions (Argyis & Schön, 1996). Reflection breaks self-confirming or single-loops and promotes individual, team, and organizational learning.

Like dialoging, reflection helps to make mental models explicit, which can help to challenge and clarify knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, and values. In fact, deep reflections on personal beliefs, as well as assumptions are shown to create "learning that lasts" (Mentkowski, 2000).

From a learning perspective, looking at one's ideas and beliefs from multiple perspectives or from a perspective of "outside in" versus "inside out" (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 36) is a reflective process that has resulted in learning outcomes such as "greater awareness and understanding of the self, new perspectives on their experience, changes in behavior, and deeper commitments to action" (Marienau, 1999, as cited by Taylor et al., 2000, p. 37).

The social learning processes of dialogue, reflection, and asking questions drive the emergence of individuals' values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge, such that they become operationalized (Preskill & Torres, 1999a). Engaging in these clarifications can result in identifying differences in terminology that can cause potential issues with communication and learning, as well as the surfacing of attitudinal and preconceived notions that represent potential sources of conflict at both individual and team levels and that can interfere with learning and change (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). From an operational intelligence perspective, this clarification benefits the organization, because it uncovers the very values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge that might be preventing individuals and teams from succeeding. Organizational learning depends on the operationalization of individual and team values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge; without it, learning and change can become static and the status quo acceptable (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b).

Engaging in the social learning process of identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge helps to make mental models, or frames of reference, explicit. Epistemological change is more likely to occur because individuals become conscious of their prior thinking and reexamine their values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge in relation to team members and the organization. This also functions to build greater understanding and tolerance among the collective team because it brings awareness as to why individuals behave or act in a certain manner (Preskill & Torres, 1999a).

Although identified as separate social learning processes, there is an interactive effect among these. In general, all social learning processes work to facilitate cognitive dissonance and subsequent accommodation that promotes re-equilibrium. Through the interaction between social learning processes, transformational learning is promoted at the individual, team, and organizational level.

### **Team and Organizational Learning**

**Team learning.** The importance of social relations in understanding the creation, acquisition, and use of knowledge, as well as the degree to which learning does or does not occur has been examined from a knowledge management perspective. Specifically, it has been found that teams with strong ties are more likely to transfer complex knowledge (Hansen, 1999, as cited by Argote, McEvily, & Reagans, 2003). This has implications from a learning perspective; it illustrates that team dynamics and social context can impact knowledge sharing and learning with regards to whether or not, and to what degree, knowledge is shared among individuals and ultimately within the organization. Scribner and Donaldson (2001) argued that team learning constituted individuals within the group reaching a place of shared meaning facilitated through an instructor providing a learning environment that enabled transformative learning. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) describe shared meaning as a team arriving at a “meaningful common purpose” that is co-created and shares collective performance goals (pp. 38-39). Organizational learning models with a social learning focus tap into diversity of thought and perspective at individual levels. Essentially, social learning processes function to catalyze individual thinking into shared meaning at the team level.

**Organizational learning.** Organizational learning has been defined as a collective body of individuals that acts to embed knowledge and learning into the fabric of the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Marsick & Neaman, 1996; Watkins, 1996). Organizational learning is perceived as a continuous process of organizational growth and improvement that: (a) is integrated with work activities; (b) invokes the alignment of values, attitudes, and perceptions among organizational members; and (c) uses information or feedback about both processes and outcomes to make changes (Torres et al., 1996, p. 2, as cited by Preskill & Torres, 1999b, p. 49). Organizational learning is typically achieved through inquiry, more specifically through feedback loops (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

Inquiry is fundamental to driving learning and feedback loops needed to further explore organizational values, norms, processes, and criteria such that both individual mindset shifts and team shared meaning might occur beyond the accepted status quo knowledge of the organization. Inquiry plays a critical role in driving learning from individual, team and organizational perspectives. It is the intersection of individual and team inquiry where collaborative team learning occurs and organizational knowledge begins to take form (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Inquiry produces feedback loops that help make individual, team and organizational “theories of action” explicit, allowing for the conscious examination of the theories at all levels.

A theory of action is an organizational task knowledge that is unique to an organization. This organizational task knowledge is based on the organizational system’s beliefs, operations, procedures, and protocols (Argyris & Schön, 1996). A theory of

action controls an organization's actions and its way of being. Its two forms include "espoused theory," which is what is espoused or said to be done, versus "theory-in-use," which is what is actually done (p. 13). Organizational learning occurs when inquiry results in changes to theory-in-use. This results when learning disrupts individual or a team's theory-in-use, leading to new actions carried out within the organization. However, there are two different kinds of learning, "single-loop learning" and "double-loop learning," that are associated with organizational inquiry that result in two very different outcomes.

Single-loop learning occurs as individuals engage in discussions that result in minimal changes to strategies and assumptions and leave the theory of action unchanged (Argyis & Schön, 1996). Specifically, it contributes to maintaining the status quo because feedback is shared one-way with the purpose to correct a defect and stabilize the system, but to not change it. This results in no action or changes to theory-in-use and freezes individuals and organizations back into their espoused theories.

Double-loop learning, on the other hand, results in changes to theory-in-use because it surfaces underlying strategies and assumptions in such a way that these can be questioned and changed (Argyis & Schön, 1996). In this instance, a two-way feedback loop drives explicit action and changes to individual perspectives, values, assumptions, and strategy, leading to changes. From a learning perspective, this is what is needed to drive learning, performance, and change in organizations. Double-loop learning can do this by surfacing individual and team viewpoints, perceptions, and reactions such that they can be used to challenge current organizational policies, processes, procedures, and



culture. Double-loop learning helps to unfreeze espoused theories such that they can be changed; this can result in new changes to theory-in-use.

As double-loop learning becomes an inherent part of institutional practice, an organization can be described as exhibiting deuterolearning (Argryis & Schön, 1996). Deuterolearning occurs when an organization's members continuously and unconsciously integrate new strategies for learning into institutional practice (Visser, 2007). In organizations exhibiting the highest levels of deuterolearning, the culture can be described as one that has learned how to apply individual, team, and organizational learning to new challenges (Argryis & Schön, 1996). From an organizational learning perspective, "learning how to learn refers to organization members reflection on their own and the team's learning processes" (Preskill & Torres, 1999b, p. 46).

## **Methods**

### **Case Study Methodology**

Case studies align with the interpretive and constructivist epistemologies of this research, because they allow for the in-depth description and analysis that is inherent to the context of a bounded system while obtaining and honoring the uniqueness of multiple realities of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The bounded system of this case occurred on two levels: individual and team. At an individual level, each learning manager participant had individual experiences engaging in Evaluative Inquiry that were investigated. The team level included the collective group of learning managers dialoguing and learning together through Evaluative Inquiry processes. Because these

individual and collective levels aligned to the Evaluative Inquiry model, a case study design was a natural choice for this study.

### **Description of Context**

This study was conducted during 2015-2017 within the context of one learning department within a global corporation based in the United States. The general culture of the organization regarding learning could be described as conservative, individualistic, and event-based. This culture had contributed, in part, to the overuse of traditional learning practices such as one-time learning events delivered via classroom-based training or eLearning modules. Learning focused primarily on the individual, where “proof” of learning was established by documenting attendance of formal learning events, and/or a “check-the-box” method indicating that employees had read and understood the content of a policy or procedure. Consequently, this has limited the focus on team and organizational learning and has prevented the implementation of learning approaches that are more informal and social in nature.

There is an efficiency mindset that is embedded within the organizational culture where the learning managers operate, and this contributes to a hesitancy to engage in informal and social forms of learning that often require more time because of the need to engage individuals and teams in richer forms of communication (e.g. knowledge sharing, face-to-face communication, seeking diversity of perspective, and engaging in open debate). Additionally, teams are viewed as bodies of individuals that come together for the purpose of solving problems and to make decisions and to not necessarily engage with each other for the sake of contemplation and learning. Integrating EI and social

learning processes at the team level represented a challenge to how teams within this organization typically operated and challenged the conservative, individualistic, and event-based learning culture.

Prior to the commencement of this study, mid-level leadership recognized the value of alternative methods of learning that would promote action within the organization and move learning beyond the individual towards team and organizational learning. In addition, upper-level leadership supported the use of alternative methods (i.e., EI model) as an approach to address inefficiencies in organizational systems and processes, such as the operating model, as well as a lack of consistency in how learning managers were applying certain work processes. Upper-level leadership was also familiar with research (i.e., Bersin) that reported benefits of approaching learning from a more holistic perspective and recognized gaps in their learning department's approach to holistic learning. This led to the acknowledgement that the EI model was an alternative method that might be able to mitigate gaps; mid-level leadership and the research team were entrusted to implement the EI model. Ultimately, this provided an opportunity to introduce Evaluative Inquiry as a learning approach and document how the learning processes of the model influenced individual, team, and organizational learning outcomes.

The EI team selected needs assessments as the focus of inquiry as it represented an area for improvement within the learning department and a business-critical work process for both the learning managers and the organization. Using the EI approach presented a new opportunity for the learning department.

**Scope of Work**

The study began with a request to leadership to evaluate a newly-created operating model within a learning department. The intent of the new operating model was to establish consistency on key processes and procedures utilized by learning managers (LMs) within the learning department. Specifically, the operating model included critical processes and procedures that learning managers were responsible for conducting such as: the identification of business and learning needs; the design, development, and implementation of various internal learning solutions; and the evaluation of learning effectiveness. Given the complexity and scale of the operating model, the scope of the EI work was on the needs assessment processes and the tools to carry out them out in a consistent manner. Needs assessment represented a business-critical process and was one of the first processes LMs engaged in when using the new operating model. Additionally, LMs had varying levels of understanding regarding the carrying out of needs assessments; the tools and process used varied among learning managers. These differing perspectives provided an opportunity to examine how using the EI model could facilitate individual, team, and organizational learning to create a standardized and unified needs assessment approach. It is important to note that although needs assessment was the focus of the EI activities in this study, the purpose of this study was to explore the application of the EI model with specific interest on the social learning processes that enabled individual, team, and organizational learning outcomes. This purpose was guided by two research questions: (1) Which social learning processes were

present and (2) Which social learning processes were associated with individual, team, and organizational learning outcomes?

### **Researchers' Positions**

The research team consisted of three individuals. The first two team members were employees within the organization who had responsibilities dedicated to enabling learning excellence within this learning department and had responsibilities to educate and improve upon the capabilities of internal practitioners (i.e., learning managers). The third team member was a researcher from a local university who acted as an external consultant on Evaluative Inquiry. Based on discussions of these three team members, a decision was made to approach the organization to carry out a research study using Evaluative Inquiry. The two team members who were employed by the organization approached leadership regarding the opportunity to apply Evaluative Inquiry within the organization. This was a natural extension of their jobs related to improving learning excellence and offered a unique opportunity to apply this approach to learning within the department.

The two members employed by the organization served dual roles as participant observers and observer participants. As participant observers, members facilitated the EI process during working meetings and contributed their own individual thoughts and ideas at both working meetings and during participant debriefs. These members moved into a role as observer participants when conducting research. This typically occurred after participant debrief sessions and during researcher debriefs. The external consultant

participated solely as an observer participant during working meetings and participant and researcher debriefs, where the main role was to observe, document, and do research.

### **Participants, Data Collection and Analysis**

**Participant selection.** There were 13 learning managers included in the original participant population for this case study. Each worked within the same learning department within the same US-based global corporation. As part of their regular responsibilities, each learning manager was required to utilize the standardized needs assessment approach and participate in working meetings. However, they were not required to participate in the study portion of this investigation, which included participating in participant debriefs and interviews to capture their experiences in engaging in the Evaluative Inquiry process. After the informed consenting process, eleven of the thirteen learning managers agreed to participate in the study.

**Participant characteristics.** This group of LMs was approximately 30 to 40 years old, represented eight different ethnicities, and included six females and five males; each had at least five years of experience within the organization. They had varying levels of understanding in performing needs assessments, so it was believed that using a model such as EI would help to capitalize on their varying levels of understanding of needs assessments and help the organization generate learning at individual, team, and organizational levels.

**Data collection.** The data collection methods used in this study included observation of formal working meetings, observation and audio recording of participant and researcher debrief meetings, and initial and follow-up interviews collected via a

formal interview protocol. This dataset was analyzed in order to obtain a deeper understanding of how social learning processes were associated with individual, team, and organizational learning outcomes.

The Evaluative Inquiry approach was conducted over the course of seven months (October 2015-April 2016). This allowed adequate time for the natural iterations of Evaluative Inquiry processes to occur. Additionally, it provided the time needed to observe individual, team, and organizational learning outcomes.

During this time, learning managers participated in the working meetings that utilized the EI approach and used the needs assessment approach and tools that were developed from these meetings. After each formal discussion group meeting, only the learning managers that had consented to participate in the research study were asked to participate in a 30-minute participant debrief meeting. The purpose of these debrief meetings was for learning manager participants to discuss and reflect on the nature of the learning processes and their experiences regarding the Evaluative Inquiry process. After the Evaluative Inquiry process ended in April 2016, study participants were interviewed in order to obtain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Additionally, participants were encouraged to apply the needs assessment process within the organization. A brief monitoring phase was then conducted during February-March 2017, 10 to 11 months after formally ending Evaluative Inquiry team meetings, in order to gauge learning manager application and any organizational learning that occurred. Table 1 includes a summary of data collection instruments.

Table 1

*Social Learning: Data Collection Instrument(s)*

Procedure	Working Meeting	Debrief Meeting(s)	Interview (Initial)	Interview (Follow-up)
<b>Purpose</b>	Discuss experiences, understandings, and provide feedback to the group about the needs assessment component of the GLO operating model; improve and standardize needs assessments component.	Debrief of bi-monthly meeting on the nature of the learning processes that occurred during previous working meeting(s).	Obtain a deeper understanding of participants' understandings and experiences during the study.	Obtain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences in applying the needs assessment product/process that was created.
<b>Frequency</b>	Monthly	Monthly	1x (2-3 months after final working meeting)	1x (10-12 months after final working meeting)
<b>Duration</b>	1 hour	30 min (participant) 30 min (researcher)	30 min	30 min
<b>Data Collection Instrument</b>	Narrative and/or Observation Protocol	Audio Recording; Narrative and/or Observation Protocol	Formal Interview Protocol; Audio Recording	Formal Interview Protocol; Audio Recording

**Data analysis.** The data analysis consisted of both deductive and inductive practices (Erickson, 1986). Specific questions guided this study and preliminary codes were developed based upon deductive practice, specifically, exploring the dataset for examples of individual, team, and organizational learning outcomes and the social learning processes of the Evaluative Inquiry model. While these elements guided data analysis, the researcher remained open to findings that naturally emerged from the data.

Descriptive coding and in vivo coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) were used in the first cycle coding methods to create data chunks, representing learning outcomes, that emerged from the interview data. Descriptive coding allowed for



identification of basic topics that emerged from the qualitative data (e.g., knowledge and characteristics of needs assessments, challenges to thinking on needs assessments, experiences in conducting needs assessments, individual and team perspectives on using needs assessments, and organizational barriers in performing needs assessments) and then to index and categorize this information into categories.

Given the interpretive and constructivist nature of both the case study and the EI process itself, it was important that codes also be based upon the experiences and perspectives of the participants themselves. This influenced the use of in vivo coding to capture participants' voices directly by creating codes which represented participants own words and short phrases (e.g., "*makes you think differently...*," "*helped build perception of team,*" and "*we need to do this*"). Pattern coding (Miles et al., 2014) was then used as a second cycle coding method to organize first cycle codes into meaningful categories and themes. A matrix was used to collectively display results of this coding activity. Note that names of participants provided in this article are pseudonyms.

Next, the identified categories and themes from first and second cycle coding activities were reorganized into a new matrix according to definitions of individual, team, and organizational learning. The literature on organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Bersin & Associates, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c) was revisited in order to ensure that emerging interpretations aligned. Then the literature on Preskill and Torres (1999a, 1999b) was used to model and create closed codes based on the social learning processes themselves. The social learning processes, as described per the Preskill and Torres (1999a, 1999b) model, guided thinking around interpreting results and findings.

## Results

To address the research questions related to how engaging in the social learning processes of Evaluative Inquiry facilitated individual, team, and organizational learning, the results section is organized to show the types of learning outcomes that occurred within the individual, team, and organization that are presented and associated with identified social learning processes present in the data. To facilitate the identification of social learning process within the data, the following code definitions were used: 1) Dialogue represented interactions between learning managers in the form of active discussions and debates that facilitated understandings related to needs assessments; 2) Reflection represented instances where learning managers looked inward to examine their own thinking, perceptions, ideas, and experiences surrounding needs assessments; 3) Asking questions represented instances where participants asked questions in order to facilitate dialogue and/or thinking around the needs assessment topic; 4) Clarifying values represented statements about someone or something seen as important or beneficial to applying a needs assessment approach; 5) Clarifying beliefs referred to learning managers' perceptions about needs assessments and their role in conducting and/or influencing activities on needs assessments, including perceived barriers when carrying out needs assessments; 6) Clarifying assumptions represented instances where learning managers called into question their existing thinking, perceptions, ideas, and experiences about needs assessments; and 7) Clarifying knowledge reflected statements of deeper comprehension of needs assessments as an approach (e.g., features, tools, methods, etc.). These social learning processes were identified in the data presented in

the results section within brackets in the following way: Dialogue [D], Reflection [R], Asking Questions [AQ], and Identifying and Clarifying Values [CV], Beliefs [CB], Assumptions [CA], and Knowledge [CK].

### **Individual Learning**

Two types of individual learning outcomes were present in the data: topical and new mental models. Topical learning referred to participants' learning regarding the function of needs assessments, goals of needs assessments and what makes a good needs assessment. New mental models represented a mindset shift due to changes in participants' views regarding the value and purpose of needs assessments in their practice as learning managers.

**Topical learning.** Topic learning reflected content learning as defined as new perspectives, knowledge, skills and understandings gained on the needs assessment approach. This did include the use of the knowledge to develop a new needs assessment template and recommended steps for conducting needs assessments. Ten out of eleven participants provided examples in the data that represented topical learning.

Learning managers gained a different perspective about needs assessment while carrying out the inquiry. This led to understandings about how and when needs assessments might be used and how their current practices with needs assessments may not be as beneficial as they previously thought. Through dialogue and related reflections, participants clarified their knowledge and beliefs about their current practices with needs assessments and considered how they might engage in new practices with needs assessments.

When I think about the actual [process of conducting needs assessments] there's the learning that I've had about the topic of discussion [needs assessments] [CK], too it's similar to [what was said by] Sandee [D], that it's forcing me to think about how I currently do things [R] and how could I do it differently, and learn different new ways, best practice [CK, CB]. (Emilee)

Topic learning also included how to better use the needs assessments tool with business partners with regards to identifying relevant business need(s), learning objective(s), and outcome(s).

It's sticking and I'm applying it, even to the point where I think very early in our conversations [with business partners], the way I look at building objectives [CK] and, from the very start, what am I accomplishing, taking that step back and looking at what does the business need here [R]. How do I tie that back? [AQ] How do I tie these objectives from this course back and making even the basic things tie together? What is that basic business need [CK]? (Catherine)

The EI process had contributed to learning of why the creation of a needs assessment template was important, as well as how the tool helped the needs assessment process with business partners in terms of understanding and recognizing needs.

Some of the learnings that I have related to this topic is that if we want to define our strategy, we have to understand the learners and the stakeholders [CB]. The needs assessment [template] is one of the tools that allows us to understand, identify, and recognize the needs from the stakeholders, and also the learners [CK]. So, there are some needs, and based on that we have to define the learning

objectives or the learning strategy or whatever is needed for the business [CB] to have an impact on business [CV]. (Mary)

These learnings were achieved as individuals who clarified their knowledge, beliefs and values regarding needs assessments and their use within the organization.

Observations of working meetings supported learning managers engaging in social learning processes to facilitate topical learning. These social learning processes enabled learning managers to move from topic learning around the “what” to topic learning around the “why” and “how” regarding perspectives, importance, knowledge/skills, and context. Researcher observations documented learning managers asking questions such as: “What *conditions or circumstances* would you use a needs assessment?”; “How do needs assessments fit into the [department]?”; “Are needs assessments completed on an as-needed basis?”; “How do we get in front of the situations so that needs assessments are part of the processes?”; and “Can we standardize what is needed in needs assessment?”

The dialogue around these questions led to the identification and clarification of: values (*need to get clients to understand the process of why a needs assessment*) [CV]; beliefs (*we need to get clients involved with the [department name] team prior to determining their product*) [CB]; assumptions (*the organization does not understand the use of needs assessments and often think they need learning solutions when they do not fully understand the issue or needs that they are dealing with*); and have a “lack of understanding of the value of needs assessments” [CA], and knowledge “[we are] working out of sync – with clients who may not know the needs of all the sub clients

*related to the group,” “we do not have a set tool, a process,” and “need to unify the information in order to determine the needs of the affiliates.”* As participants continued to engage in the learning processes through the EI approach, learning began to shift from purely topical to the mental models of needs assessments.

**New mental models.** New mental models indicated a mindset shift in LMs' thinking regarding the use of a needs assessment approach. This included the importance of having a developed set of questions to use, being purposeful in planning needs assessments, and thinking about the how and why needs assessments are employed, such as driving performance versus learning. The new mental models occurred as dialogue and reflection on the development of the template promoted cognitive dissonance surrounding the practice of needs assessments. Conversations also resulted in a clarification of beliefs and knowledge as LMs shared their perspectives around the use of needs assessments and accommodated new understanding about the needs assessment approach. This represents the differentiation and integration cycle described by Taylor et al. (2000) that facilitates epistemological mindset shifts.

Eight out of 11 participants provided examples in the data that represented new mental models.

It was discussing it [D]. It's like, "Oh, yeah. When I was doing 'this', I thought about 'this', and when I did 'this', 'this' came to mind. [R]". So, it was seeing how other people were also using this [using needs assessment approach] and going, [CK] "Oh yeah!" Even though I wasn't checking a sheet [needs

assessment template], and have the sheet with me; it's like, "Oh, yeah. I thought about this [R]. I asked these questions. (Catherine)

Discussions enabled a mindset shift in how LMs perceived the use of needs assessments, which is illustrated in Catherine's thinking related to planning for needs assessments and using the questions from the template as a guide when she engaged in needs assessment work with business partners.

As we went through this process [Evaluative Inquiry], and while the formal forms [templates], and the outputs, and the aids are all good, it makes you think differently about how you approach things [CB, CK]. It was having those questions [template] embedded in your mind before you started conversations [CK]. (Catherine)

In addition to planning for needs assessments and using template questions as a guide, new mental models related to performance versus learning were created. Participants recognized the value of needs assessments in identifying actual performance needs rather than simply identifying learning objectives.

I think the performance versus learning [discussion] was very interesting [D]. I immediately said at the beginning well it's clear to me these are different things [CK, CB] but to think a little deeper about that was insightful [R] to me one important part of performance, [is] what we agree[d] upon [D] [that learning is] not proportional to [performance] and it links back to that whole needs assessment that maybe a learning solution or traditional learning solution might not be optimal to improve a specific lack in performance]. Maybe focus more on those

things that are really related to what people do versus you know transferring knowledge to them [CK, CA]. (George)

George's quote illustrates that new mental models of learning and performance were created through the differentiation and integration cycle. Learning managers distinguished differences between performance and learning through dialogue that facilitated the clarification of knowledge, values, and beliefs.

Researchers also observed the mindset change in George and how reflection and dialogue promoted these changes:

You could see his wheels turning in his head [R] as he listens to people talking [D] last time he really was very focused on that he needed to develop knowledge modules and all this traditional [learning solutions] and now he's thinking that they could actually use more [of] a performance perspective [R]. (Researcher Debrief)

It was also documented in researcher debriefs how learning managers had, in general, shifted their mindset leading to potential changes in practice. For example, they were "beginning to shift how they do things I don't think it's explicit, it's implicit. They're beginning to [recognize] that that's missing [Needs Assessment process] and are planning to challenge current practices."

As learning managers engaged in social learning processes, the individual learning outcomes of topical learning and new mental models emerged. As the process of carrying out the inquiry continued there was also a shift from individual to team



learning outcomes. This occurred as learning managers became more empowered as a result of engaging in social learning processes.

### **Team Learning**

Team Learning was initially identified through the shifting of pronouns used during the debriefings with learning managers. As reflection on the development of the needs assessment approach occurred, learning managers moved from using “I” to “We” or “Team.”

We had a clear understanding of needs assessment as a team, as a whole team [CV] and that we might have different ideas of needs assessment [CB], we might have a different technique, to gather all goals assessment [but] [CB] I think overall we [now] have like a mutual understanding of needs assessment [CB].  
(Nicholas)

This team learning appeared to result from improved connections and relationships that resulted from learning managers sharing, listening, and contemplating each other’s thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and issues and engaging in equitable team debate. The learning process allowed for a collective voice to rise as continued engagement in social learning processes shifted the group from “I” to “We”. This collective voice of the group replaced the dominant voice of any one member and resulted in the co-creation of needs assessment approach.

Emilee described this co-creation as contributing to a broad, team understanding of needs assessments, noting that *“Through different people sharing their experiences of how to [D], helped probably alleviate some misperceptions [CB] or also brought that*

*same common understanding of actually what a needs assessment is” [CB]. Mary recognized the value of the sharing in driving team alignment, stating “I think as a group collectively, we all are more aligned when it comes to needs assessments” [CB] and that this process helped to “align [the team] on ways forward” [CB].*

**Shared meaning.** Learning managers became more empowered when carrying out the inquiry as a result of reaching a place of shared meaning and understanding about the needs assessment approach. Shared meaning emerged as individuals recognized that they, as a team, were empowered to co-create the needs assessment approach rather than separately as individuals or because of a mandate from a ‘higher’ organizational power. The confidence that learning managers experienced around the co-creation and ownership of their needs assessments approach, as well as the value they placed on working collectively, represents this theme of shared meaning seen in the data set. Seven out of eleven (64%) learning manager participants provided examples in the data set that represented shared meaning.

Learning managers gained a sense of “We” versus “I” as a result of the collective voice facilitated through the social learning processes. Learning managers described how beneficial engaging in the Evaluative Inquiry process was on both personal and team levels; the development of shared meaning was being facilitated through dialogue, resulting in co-creation at the team level.

I’m glad that we’re doing this because then that means that I don’t have to do it [Needs Assessment] myself and I’m getting feedback from other people as how it applies to [us] as a team [D] so that’s very helpful. Cause we would all have to

do our own needs analysis. We would all have to do our own template for this.

(Keisha)

Learning managers recognized the empowering qualities of social learning processes in enabling shared meaning. This led to confidence that the needs assessment process was their own and they had a collective voice in creating it.

I think that the fact that we're all contributing to feedback [D] and even though we created the template and so forth that you're asking for our input [D] that engages us to use it because it wasn't something just handed out [and we are told] you just need to use it. We're all having input into the creation of all these templates [D]. (Maria)

Through clarifying beliefs and knowledge, a deeper understanding around needs assessment occurred. Through their collective voice, participants expressed confidence in their ability to co-create a new needs assessment approach and tools. Learning managers recognized the empowering nature of developing a needs assessment process rather than it being imposed upon them.

I think not only from the higher level learning of [understanding] what the importance of a needs assessment [is, but] how to go about doing it [CK] – I think the fact that we all contributed to it also gives us confidence in poetic license to [co-create], because we feel we truly understand the process and the objective of the needs assessment process, and by understanding what the objective is means that we can actually find out our own way to get there [CB, CK]. (Emilee)

Researcher observations in early meetings indicated that people were unwilling to participate at first. The Evaluative Inquiry facilitator had to pull things out of them. By the third meeting, however, people were more actively participating, requiring less work on the facilitator's part to garner participation from the learning managers in the Evaluative Inquiry process. Observers witnessed an increased level of conversation, debate, and equal contribution by all in favor of reaching a place of shared meaning and co-creating product.

When people spoke this time you could see that they had thought about what they were saying [R] and they spoke with a greater level [of] self-identity and self-confidence and now I feel part of the process [R] versus the last time the conversation was a little bit more disjointed [D] and the comments were a break in the conversation cause people were like, 'Wait, did I say something wrong [ or was I] completely off?' (Researcher Debrief)

Researchers also observed the confidence being displayed by LMs as they engaged in EI process. In general, the learning managers had moved from non-empowering displays of behavior in the first few Evaluative Inquiry working meetings toward more empowered behaviors by the fifth working meeting.

### **Organizational Learning**

There was one type of organizational learning outcome present in the data set, "taking action". Taking action referred to learning managers' taking action by applying or using their learning on the needs assessment approach within the organization and with their business partners.

**Taking action.** Taking action is defined as participants' use of individual and team learning to promote organizational learning by transferring their knowledge into the organization. This occurred as learning managers applied their team and individual learning and used the new needs assessment approach and template with their 'business partners'. The actions of the learning managers helped to increase the visibility to, reception of, and use of the needs assessment approach by the learning managers' business partners. Six out of eleven (55%) of participants provided examples in the data that represented taking action.

Individual and team learning led to the use of the needs assessment approach and template. During the Applying Learning inquiry process component of the EI model, participants took action in applying topical learning to needs assessments.

I did sort of apply this and I got the leadership and we actually had him introduce why we're doing this training to get the buy in [CK]. And so, we led the meeting with that. "This is why you're here. This is why it's important. This is why it applies to business." Right? [AQ, R] The impact. I have never seen a group that engage[d] part of it, because you have to understand the expected outcome [CV]. So, whether or not I'm doing it formally, it's getting in [referring to use of needs assessment approach] [CB] I'm taking the components and I'm applying them, although I haven't sat down and formally written things out [referring to using needs assessment template]. (Catherine)

This demonstrates that LMs were taking action by applying their needs assessment knowledge to learning programs, as well as engaging in dialogue with their business partners on the topic.

Learning managers engaged in social learning processes by dialoguing with their business partners on the needs assessment approach. Conversations with business partners outside the EI group represents how learning managers promoted action and organizational learning through social learning processes. This is resulting in the clarification of knowledge, beliefs, and values around the needs assessment approach from an organizational perspective. Learning managers used their individual and team learning on needs assessments to take action in changing how they engaged with business partners around the needs assessment topic.

I think we think differently [because] you're always asking more. I am always asking more. It's like, I always have this stuff in the back of my mind now, and I go to meetings, it's like, I guess it's driving me to ask more questions [D], just on a very high level, and then specific, if there is the opportunity to be able to shape the learning [CV], then you go full-fledged into this [the needs assessment approach], but it's making me stop and ask more appropriate questions, I think, when it comes to learning [D]. (Emilee)

This demonstrates that by dialoguing with business partners around needs assessments, learning managers are promoting action and organizational learning. Through this dialogue, there is also the clarification of values occurring around using the needs assessment approach to help shape learning at this organization.

Collectively, learning managers were able to use their individual learning around needs assessment to negotiate and dialogue with business partners. They also engaged in social learning processes to promote organizational learning by influencing business partners to apply the needs assessment approach. Learning managers were able to apply their learning to successfully negotiate with their business partners on the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of needs assessments. Additionally, learning managers used both their knowledge of needs assessments, as well as the template, to drive learning and action at the organizational level.

I am in negotiation [with my business partner and I stated] [D] guys we need this [template] to develop – to develop this content. They said...there is no need to know [but I stated] I have a need, and this is a template [and was able to negotiate its completion because I had] evidence because you can’t negotiate with other functions [business partners] without having evidence. And this is the evidence you have [needs assessment template and approach] [CK]. (Nicholas)

Learning managers engaged in forms of dialogue, such as negotiation, with their business partners, resulting in the clarification of knowledge around past organizational failures to perform needs assessments and enabling the organization to engage in use of the needs assessment approach and templates. Some learning managers were not able to successfully negotiate with their business partners with regards to performing a needs assessment, but they were still able to increase visibility by driving a dialogue on the topic.

They've [ business partners] been introduced to it" [and] I've showed them how it can work in order to enable, or at least understand what their needs [are] [CK] but unfortunately, it's not fully there yet So, each and every time that I have a new project, I try to push it, get it more visibility. (Isaac)

Researcher debriefs and observations of working meetings also supported that social learning processes helped to facilitate taking action for learning managers. During the final Evaluative Inquiry meeting (28 April 2016), it was documented that learning managers were continuing to challenge business partners on the need to perform needs assessments.

### **Discussion**

Results indicated that learning occurred at individual, team, and organizational levels around needs assessment. Individual learning outcomes included topical learning and new mental models. Topical learning represented a more traditional learning outcome, namely the acquisition of knowledge around needs assessments. New mental models represented changes in learning managers' epistemological perspectives regarding needs assessments and their use. As learning managers collaborated and co-created the needs assessments process and tools, their engagement in the learning process during this work facilitated a shared meaning around needs assessments. This shared meaning indicated that team learning occurred. Organizational learning was evidenced and demonstrated as learning managers translated their learning into taking action and performance by applying their individual and team learning on needs assessments into the organization.



Dialogue (D) was consistently present during EI working meetings as learning managers engaged in discussion and sharing of information. It served as the underlying social learning process through which the other social learning processes occurred. This supports Preskill's and Torres's (1999a, 1999b) idea that dialogue is a facilitative gateway through which other social learning processes must flow. Through open dialogue, the learning managers asked questions, clarified knowledge, values, and beliefs, and reflected on what was said. This in turn promoted more dialogue that facilitated additional discussion and debate. Essentially, the interaction between dialogue and the other social learning process served as the mechanism through which the learning managers engaged in differentiation and integration (Taylor et al., 2000). Dialogue contributed to shared meaning as individuals moved from "I" to "We". Engaging in dialogue led the team to an agreed-upon understanding regarding needs assessment approaches. The team's development of shared meaning regarding needs assessments represented the team's accommodation and prompted transformational learning (Taylor et al., 2000) that shifted learning managers' practices within the organizations.

Learning managers engaged in reflecting (R), both inwardly and outwardly, as they pondered their thinking, perceptions, ideas, and experiences surrounding needs assessments. Reflection was most often associated with generating individual learning outcomes, specifically with regard to the creation of new mental models among learning managers. Because reflection has the capacity to challenge an individual's perceived versus actual action (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b), it is not surprising that increased instances of reflection were associated with cognitive dissonance, resulting in

accommodation and the mental reframing of experiences - an epistemological mindset shift (Taylor et al., 2000). Additionally, learning managers reported experiencing challenges to their prior thinking and practices around needs assessments which aligns well with Argyris and Schön's (1996) concept of double-loop learning, as it appears that reflection influenced learning managers' theory-in-use.

Asking questions (AQ) was most often documented and associated with the individual learning outcome of topical learning when participants were engaging in dialogue around the what, why, and how of the needs assessment topic. However, it is important to note that asking questions occurred throughout the Evaluative Inquiry process and served a means of challenging existing knowledge and understandings. The asking of questions helped bring to light potential problems and challenged aspects of the needs assessment approach which facilitated the process of differentiation and integration (Taylor et al., 2000).

The identification and clarification of values (CV), beliefs (CB), assumptions (CA), and knowledge (CK) represented learning and changes in practice and were present throughout the Evaluative Inquiry process. Through dialogue as the facilitative gateway, learning managers publicly shared their values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge (Preskill & Torres, 1999a) on what they perceived as important and beneficial to needs assessments. Within topical learning there was clarification of definitions, practices, and the role of needs assessments within the organization. It was the process of clarification, not only the identification of values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge, that was

critically important to facilitating common understanding and learning among the learning managers.

The continuous clarification of knowledge, values, beliefs, and assumptions throughout the EI process prompted a mindset shift among learning managers. Preskill and Torres (1999a) explained that identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge can lead individuals to accept changes to their thinking and this seems to have occurred. This was indicated by learning managers agreeing on a set of needs assessment questions, how and why needs assessments are employed, and the planning of a needs assessment. Additionally, engaging in the sharing of individual views and practices around needs assessments resulted in achieving a shared meaning among the team of learning managers, as well as the co-creation of a unified tool and approach to needs assessments.

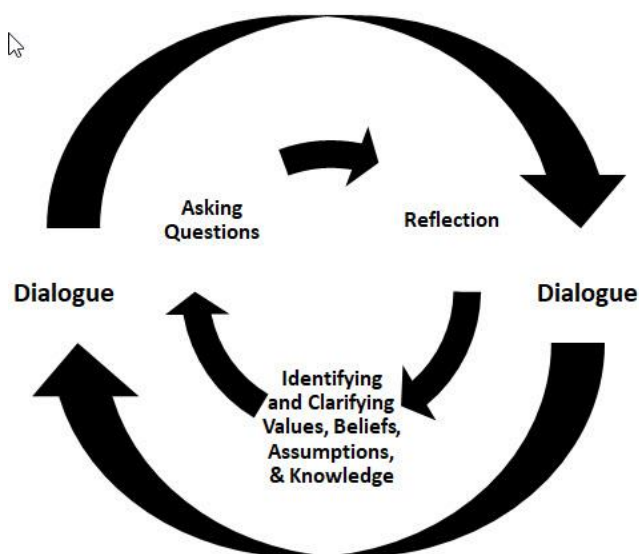
The central process of dialogue underscored the Evaluative Inquiry social learning processes. As the team of learning managers engaged in asking questions, reflection, and identification and clarification, the dialogue within the meetings became richer and more meaningful.

Engaging in the back-and-forth process of asking questions, reflection, and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge, learning managers drove integration and differentiation at both individual and team levels. The synergistic qualities of the social learning processes helped to create a state of disequilibrium and helped to establish re-equilibrium. Essentially, engaging in the social learning process was critical for learning managers to accommodate or integrate events

from EI working meetings into a new frame of reference. This supports the idea that, in general, engaging in social learning processes helped to challenge status quo. This led to a new thinking and learning for learning managers that ultimately impacted the team's practice(s) and tool(s).

Our results indicated that social learning processes facilitate learning at individual, team, and organizational levels. Dialogue appears to be the hub through which the other social learning processes flow. Specifically, it is the underlying process through which publicly asking questions, publicly reflecting, and publicly clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge occurs. It is for this reason we propose that dialogue, as displayed in the outer ring of Figure 2, surrounds the inner ring which represents the other social learning processes of asking questions, reflection, and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge.

As dialogue occurred, various opportunities emerged for individuals to engage in iterations of reflection, asking questions, and the clarification of values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge. The social learning processes work synergistically. As participants in the EI process ask questions, it prompts reflection and clarification of knowledge and values. As participants clarify knowledge and values, it prompts reflection and questioning. As participants reflect, it prompts clarification of knowledge and values and promotes questions. Our figure differs from Preskill's and Torres's (1999a, 1999b) original model in that we emphasize the interaction between three of the social learning processes that occur publicly through dialogue.



*Figure 2.* Interaction between Dialogue and Other Social Learning Processes

The synergistic nature of the social learning processes promotes back-and-forth feedback among team members. It is this feedback that creates double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Learning managers surfaced their individual perceptions and viewpoints, challenging current practices around needs assessments. This ultimately led to changes in theory-in-use. This theory-in-change represented organizational learning as learning managers applied team and individual learning and used the new needs assessment approach and template with their business partners.

As a part of the research process and as a part of data collection, we required participants to engage in a formal debrief immediately following working meetings. Within these debriefs questions were posed related to their learning as a result of engaging in the social learning processes and how this was related to their understanding and learning regarding needs assessments. We recognize that this formal debrief could have interjected an opportunity for participants to engage in reflection or a meta-learning

loop within the EI process. This led us to consider whether introducing a meta-learning loop into the EI model might be worth studying. We suggest that future research examine the value of explicit opportunities for participants to engage in reflection and meta-loop learning within the EI model.

The results of this study need to be considered in relation to the limitations of its design. As a case study, it represents a single organization and group of individuals. It represents a learning department that might have more openness and willingness to use a process using a more informal learning approach. Additionally, two of the researchers were employees within the organization and were a part of the EI team. This could contribute to an interpretation and bias in findings. However, these were mitigated by the third researcher who was not a member of the organization.

### **Conclusion**

Our research provides a case example of using Evaluative Inquiry within a business setting that resulted in evidence of individual, team, and organizational levels. Our results indicated that the social learning processes enabled individual, team, and organizational learning. These three types of learning occurred because participants experienced differentiation, integration, and accommodation (Taylor et al., 2000) as they progressed through the Evaluative Inquiry model. It is through the social learning processes of asking questions, reflection, and clarifying values through public dialogue that allowed for the conditions represented in adult learning and development to be met.

We identified all the social learning processes, but we recognize that there was fluidness in their interactions with one another. There was an inherent synergy between

social learning processes. This suggests that identifying one type of social learning process over another may not be critical. Rather, understanding how these processes interact to promote learning would be more significant. We would suggest that further research involving the social learning processes of the EI model focus on the interaction between social learning processes and how this interaction promotes individual, team, and organizational learning.

## CHAPTER III

### ARTICLE II: CREATING EVALUATIVE INQUIRY INFRASTRUCTURAL COMPONENTS AT THE TEAM LEVEL

#### **Abstract**

This study explored the use of Evaluative Inquiry (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b), an inquiry model of organizational learning, within a US-based global learning department of an international corporation. Specifically, it examined how engaging in the Evaluative Inquiry process created the existence of infrastructural components (e.g., culture, leadership, communication, and systems and structures) at the team level. Results indicated that the Evaluative Inquiry process generated and promoted certain conditions, at both individual and team levels, that can be associated with the four organizational infrastructural components. In addition, results suggest that organizational infrastructural components can be generated at the team level despite their presence or absence within the broader organizational context. A new conceptualization of the outside of the Evaluative Inquiry model is presented.

#### **Introduction**

Creating organizational learning requires the existence of certain conditions and qualities. These are often described from a broader organizational level but can also occur at team levels using inquiry models of learning. Research suggests that conditions and qualities such as trust, safety, dialogue, collaboration, and empowerment are critical



to team and organizational levels of learning (Argyis & Schön, 1996; Bersin & Associates, 2012; Bryner & Marcova, 1996; Edmondson, 1999; Gratton & Erickson, 2007; Hoffman & Withers, 1995; Jiang, Flores, Leelawong, & Manz, 2016; Perlow & Williams, 2003; Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b; Prusack & Cohen, 2001). If these conditions and qualities are not readily present in the broader organization, can the development of these conditions occur at the team level through the employment of inquiry models of learning?

Research suggest it is important to generate and promote these within a team-level infrastructure. Specifically, generating and promoting conditions and qualities (e.g., collaboration, shared leadership, and empowerment) at team levels have been found to result in creating a team environment that is conducive to positive team-level performance and success (Amabile & Kramer, 2011; Coutu, 2009; Fischer & Boynton, 2005; Gratton & Erickson, 2007; Jiang et al., 2016; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Pentland, 2012).

The success of team and organizational learning depends on the presence or absence of certain conditions and qualities at team levels as well as organizational levels. Inquiry models of learning can create conditions and qualities critical to both. Evaluative Inquiry (EI) offers one organizational, inquiry-based model of learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) that has the capacity to generate conditions and qualities at individual, team, and organizational levels. It does this by engaging participants in social learning processes organized around three inquiry processes.

The Evaluative Inquiry model also identifies four organizational infrastructural components (e.g., culture, leadership, communication, and systems and structures) which are described as being critical to facilitating organizational learning and the success of Evaluative Inquiry efforts. The conditions and qualities associated with these are like those found to be critical to enabling positive team-level performance and success. However, these organizational infrastructural components are primarily viewed through an organizational versus a team-level lens. This provided an opportunity to address a gap in the literature by exploring infrastructural components within the EI process rather than outside of it. Specifically, we explored how the EI process created conditions and qualities at the team level in order to support individual and team learning.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the application of the Evaluative Inquiry model within one learning department in a global US-based organization. This article is focused explicitly on the four organizational infrastructural components of EI. Specifically, it explored participants' (learning managers') experiences in engaging in the EI process for purposes of enabling individual, team, and organizational learning around a topic (i.e., developing a needs assessment approach) as well as how engaging in the EI process generated and promoted certain conditions at the team level that can be associated with the four EI organizational infrastructural components. The following research questions were used to explore the capacity of the EI model to create infrastructural conditions at the team level: (1) What conditions do learning managers identify as contributing to the success of the team through the EI process? (2) What EI

infrastructural model components (e.g., communication, systems and structures, leadership culture) were present within the conditions identified by learning managers?

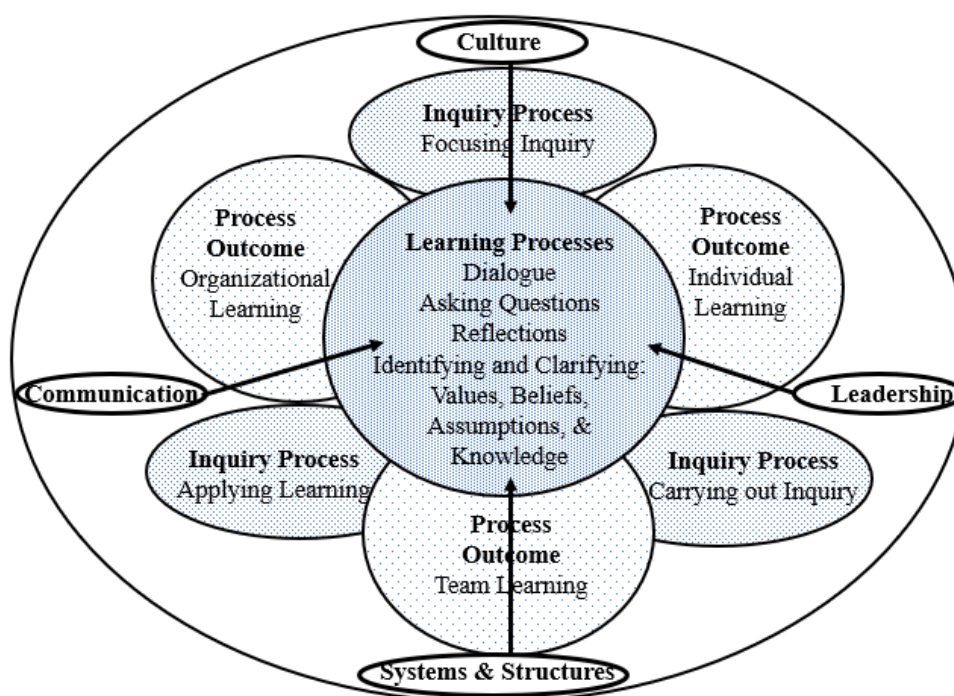
### **Relevant Literature**

This literature review provides an overview of the Evaluative Inquiry model. It then focuses exclusively on the four organizational infrastructural components of the EI model and describes conditions and qualities associated with each, as well as how these can impact individual, team, and organizational learning from both an organizational and team-level perspective. Finally, it provides a discussion on how promoting infrastructural components at team levels leads to successful team performance and empowerment, which are critical to driving learning, performance, and change at team and organizational levels.

### **Evaluative Inquiry**

Evaluative Inquiry (EI) (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) effectively drives organizational learning by blending practices inherent to both learning and evaluation. Specifically, this approach uses three inquiry processes (e.g., focusing inquiry, carrying out inquiry, and applying learning) as the framework. Evaluative Inquiry engages participants in social learning processes (e.g., dialogue, reflection, asking questions, and identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge) when carrying out evaluation practices to promote individual, team, and organizational learning. The EI model operates from a social constructivist stance; participants engage in the social learning processes during inquiry processes in order to construct learning at individual, team and organizational levels. Surrounding the social learning processes and inquiry

processes exists the organizational infrastructure that can either support or hinder the success of organizational learning and Evaluative Inquiry (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). Figure 3 is a representation of an adapted Evaluative Inquiry model. It was adapted to illustrate that although infrastructural components exist within the organizational context and appear separate from the social learning and inquiry processes, they can also exist as a part the EI process at the team level independent of their existence in the organizational context.



*Figure 3.* Adapted Evaluative Inquiry Model

The four components of organizational infrastructure culture, leadership, communication, and systems and structures are critical to the success of EI and organizational learning. These features, when present, can enhance the ability of an organization to promote organizational learning. Examples of qualities of these

infrastructural components include: cultural (encouraging an environment of trust and risk taking and valuing learning through mistakes); leadership (creating and championing a vision of organizational learning and taking action to achieve that vision); communication (collaboration and information sharing is encouraged for the sake of learning); and systems and structures (readily available and effective conduits are created that allow for seamless and transparent communication and collaboration to occur throughout the organization) (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). The presence of these components within the organizational context influences the degree of success of EI efforts. However, if these infrastructural components are not present in the organizational context, the EI model can still influence change.

It is not so much that all of the infrastructure elements must be in place and operating as described here in order for Evaluative Inquiry to succeed. Rather, Evaluative Inquiry itself serves as a major vehicle for increasing understanding within organizations and as a catalyst for organizational change. (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, pp. 57-58)

Evaluative Inquiry does this by providing a means through which the infrastructural components can emerge while carrying out the EI process. The social learning processes and the inquiry processes represent mechanisms of action within the EI model and create an internal learning infrastructure which promotes the qualities inherent to each of the infrastructural components at the team level. The aim of this study is to examine how engaging in the EI process can create the existence of the infrastructural components (e.g., culture, leadership, communication, and systems and structures) at the team level.

## **Organizational Infrastructural Components**

**Culture.** An organization that cultivates a positive learning culture supports a spirit of partnership, action, and ongoing accountability between learning and the business. Over 25 years of research demonstrates that an organization that does not have a functioning learning culture typically demonstrates fear of failure and fear of authority, defensive routines, and lacks introspection, courage, trust, relationships, and psychological safety (Argyis & Schön, 1996; Bersin & Associates, 2012a; Bryner & Marcova, 1996; Edmondson, 1999; Hoffman & Withers, 1995; Preskill & Torres, 1999b). Opposite to negative learning cultures, positive learning cultures are developed and sustained by encouraging individuals to engage in risk-taking and by creating an organizational atmosphere where it is safe to speak up (Preskill & Torres, 1999a). Four key features of positive culture include: “(1) trust and the reduction of fear, (2) teamwork and sharing, (3) leaders as champions of people and their ideas, and (4) the encouragement of constant change” (Hoffman & Withers, 1995, p. 469). A positive learning culture enables individual and team learning, continuous improvement, and organizational learning. Bersin and Associates (2012) noted the importance of an organizational learning culture that is everyone’s responsibility and includes integrating learning into the workplace as a process rather than as an event.

Evaluative Inquiry is participatory and collaborative in nature and its success depends on a culture that embodies mutual trust among all, regardless of hierarchy, as well as appreciation for the individual’s diverse knowledge, experience, and strengths. Additionally, it depends on a “fail-safe” culture where risk-taking is supported and

people are not afraid to fail, where courage is visibly rewarded, and mistakes are truly valued as opportunities to learn (Preskill & Torres, 1999a).

While it may be true that the success of EI is influenced by the surrounding organizational culture, engaging in the EI process also promotes a positive learning culture within the team. Participating in EI engages individuals and teams in expressing qualities associated with a positive learning culture. Specifically, qualities that support risk-taking behaviors such as those “that involve raising issues, asking questions, and making changes” and valuing lessons learned from mistakes promotes behaviors such as courage and trust among team members (Preskill & Torres, 1999b, p. 156). Collectively, these address the cultural issue of safety such as fear of failure and authority, competition, defensive routines, and lack of introspection, courage, mistrust, and relationships.

**Leadership.** Leadership at all levels is essential to supporting and implementing learning, performance, and change across the organization. Leadership is a fundamental organizational component that exists in a top-down hierarchical structure, as well as within a bottom-up structure where individuals and teams influence the organization through their actions.

Top-down leaders are responsible for creating and maintaining a learning culture, and they can accomplish this through the actions they take and the behaviors they model. Specifically, executive leadership actions such as valuing pluralism and a balance of power promote: the collaborative sharing of information; creating and communicating a consistent learning vision that is both actionable and realistic; removing barriers to

organizational learning by supporting systems that foster employee learning; and modeling continuous learning practices. If leaders' actions are not in alignment with creating and maintaining a learning culture, the quality of learning, performance, and change, as well as the learning environment can be limited (Preskill & Torres 1999a, 1999b).

Because leadership can occur at any level within an organization, it is possible that any member of the organization, regardless of hierarchy or role, can also impact the learning culture. In fact, research suggests that there has been a decline in top-down and individualistic Western management approaches in favor of more integrated and pluralistic ones (Fullan, 1993; Senge, 1990a, 1990b, 1996; Van de Ven & Grazman, 1995, as cited by Preskill & Torres, 1999b, p. 161). This has resulted in an increase in bottom-up approaches along with opportunities for leaders and leadership qualities to emerge from the individual contributors and teams participating in them. Preskill and Torres (1999b) noted that local line leaders (e.g., educators, department-heads, unit heads) can fulfill the leadership level within the Evaluative Inquiry model. Unlike the top-down leader, the bottom-up leader adopts a more facilitative style of leadership focusing on “motivating and involving others to set and accomplish goals synergistically” (Rees, 2001, p. 29). “Decisions are made more by consensus and collaboration. The role of a team leader is the one of coach, motivator, team member, and facilitator” (p. 29).

**Communication.** The presence or absence of transparent and authentic communication channels can impact the quality of information exchange and knowledge sharing that occurs at individual, team, and organizational levels (Buchholz, Roth, &



Hess, 1987; Preskill & Torres, 1999b; Preskill, Lackey, & Caracelli, 1997). Factors within communication (i.e., how it occurs, the content of the message, and who the communication involves) can impact the quality of communication and subsequent learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999b).

Open communication and sharing create conditions that promote the environment needed for new and/or enhanced perspectives and understanding to emerge. Human connections are needed to drive trust, mutual understanding, and shared values among team members within organizations in order to promote productive and impactful collaborations (Prusack & Cohen, 2001). These conditions are essential at the organizational, team, and individual levels.

Communication that supports EI from an organizational infrastructural perspective promotes the willingness to share information for the sake of learning, values pluralism and collective voice, encourages discovery, collection, and interpretation of information, and removes barriers to richer forms of communication such as face-to-face communications (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). These same conditions are also critical at individual and team levels, because they drive the quality of collaboration, learning, and debate that occurs among individuals and the team that ultimately produce the insights and understanding that will transfer into the organization. Qualities such as valuing and sharing differences and engaging in debate are crucial to breaking the status quo which is a critical step in raising organizational performance (Perlow & Williams, 2003).

This open expression is promoted by establishing transparent and authentic communication channels at the team level and embedding EI into organizational practice.

Evaluative Inquiry supports teamwork by providing both the structure (e.g., space, time, face-to-face meetings) and process (e.g., inquiry and social learning processes) needed to promote the conditions that drive transparent and authentic communication and learning at the team level.

**Systems and structures.** Organizational systems and structures represent one of the foundational building blocks needed to support a learning culture, integrated and diverse leadership, and collaborative communication. Specifically, strong organizational systems and structures enable cross-functional interactions by bringing people together who may not normally interact. This provides for enhanced relationships across business units and departments. Weaker organizational systems and structures often fragment work tasks and silo workers, creating barriers to cross-functional interactions (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). However, the Evaluative Inquiry process is a system and structure which promotes a collaborative environment by creating relationships among team members. Specifically, it promotes interdepartmental collaboration and communication and contributes to shared insights and perspectives as participants recognize their role and contributions beyond that of just an individual perspective.

### **Infrastructural Components and Team Success**

There is much literature that describes what successful teams and teamwork look like and do not look like within organizations (Amabile & Kramer, 2011; Coutu, 2009; Fischer & Boynton, 2005; Gratton & Erickson, 2007; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993;

Pentland, 2012). In these descriptions, one can see the critical connection between building and sustaining certain infrastructural conditions at the team level and enabling successful teams and teamwork. Specifically, infrastructural components of EI such as leadership, culture, communication, and systems and structures—along with the quality and presence of these within the team environment—can be associated with contributing to team performance and success.

Teams are representative of the organizational infrastructure within which they operate, but they also create and influence their own infrastructure, impacting their success as they work together. Communication and the underlying organizational culture that supports collaboration are key factors in driving successful team performance (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). One of the eight factors described in promoting this collaboration and communication at the team level focuses on the importance of establishing a team lead that is both task and relationship-oriented in nature. This requires a team lead that transitions between relationship-oriented behaviors that encourage sharing, trust, and goodwill and more task-oriented behaviors such as clarifying objectives, outlining task parameters, and monitoring and providing feedback on the project (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). This demonstrates the importance of the infrastructural component of leadership, as well the impact a leader has on team success.

Team members that feel safe in their environment and trust relationships within the team demonstrate risk-taking behavior. In fact, teams that value and embrace risk-taking demonstrate behaviors such as asking questions and presenting challenges to the

status quo (Coutu, 2009). This represents how team members can influence the team's success, as well as driving more meaningful and diverse insights at the team level.

Enabling systems and structures that build and then support opportunities for heterogeneous teams to form is essential for creating a knowledge-sharing atmosphere where pluralism and collective voice can be nurtured (Argote et al., 2003; Gratton & Erickson, 2007; Haunschild & Sullivan, 2002; Schilling, Vidal, Ployhart, & Marangoni, 2003). This knowledge-sharing atmosphere depends on team members who engage in the following: 1) open-ended discussion and problem-solving; 2) supporting authentic and transparent communication; 3) using dialogue to reach a place of shared meaning; and 4) accepting a team leader that sets clear expectations and promotes an open environment (Gratton & Erickson, 2007; Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b).

### **Empowerment and Team Success**

When empowerment is achieved at a team level, it is more likely that a team is successful and will perform at a higher level than one that does not reach a position of empowerment. Much empirical research has demonstrated the positive relationship between empowerment and team performance (Harter et al., 2002; Laschinger et al., 2004; Seibert et al., 2004; Spreitzer, 1996; Srivastava et al., 2006, as cited by Jiang et al., 2016). This positive relationship between empowerment and team performance has implications for organizational learning, because empowered teams demonstrate qualities needed to drive learning, performance, and change at team and organizational levels.

Empowerment evolves as team members' increase their sense of ownership, motivation, and accountability for individual, team, and organizational decisions and

actions. Specifically, empowered teams demonstrate qualities such as: autonomy, shared leadership, decision-making authority, ownership of work processes, and allocation of resources (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Manz & Sims, 1987, as cited by Jiang, 2016). These qualities can be enhanced or hindered by other infrastructural components (e.g., culture, leadership, communication, and systems and structures) at the team level. Evaluative Inquiry has the capacity to nurture the infrastructural components so that empowering qualities may be expressed among team members.

## **Methods**

### **Case Study Methodology**

Evaluative Inquiry was applied within the context of one department in one organization. These conditions represent a bounded system, so a case study design was selected for this research. Specifically, this research is interpretive/constructivist in nature and case studies are beneficial for identifying multiple realities and honoring the unique in-depth descriptions and analysis that is characteristic of a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This bounded system occurred at two levels: individual and team. At the individual level, each learning manager participant experienced the Evaluative Inquiry process individually; these experiences were then investigated individually. The team level represents the collective group of learning managers that attended Evaluative Inquiry meetings and engaged in the Evaluative Inquiry process by creating the surrounding conditions or team infrastructure.

## **Description of Context**

This study was conducted in the 2015-2017 timeframe. The case focused on learning managers who worked in one learning department within a US-based global corporation. Other than upper-level leadership granting permission to try the EI approach within their learning department and providing the structural and human resources (e.g., time, space, personnel) to do the work, there was little existence of infrastructural components at the organizational level. The EI team and study activities ran independently without infrastructural support from the organization. Ultimately, this led to a decision to focus on team-level versus organizational-level infrastructural components.

The surrounding organizational culture in which the learning managers operated was conservative, regulated, and hierarchical in nature. This contributed to cultural conditions within the organization such as fear of failure along with a hesitancy to engage in risk-taking and in embracing mistakes and lessons learned. The larger organization had taken efforts to address cultural issues through cultural campaigns and surveys, leadership engagement, training, and literature. However, learning managers communicated that they operated within an organizational culture that was, at times, negative.

Broader communications within this organization typically occurred via technology (e.g., e-mail, learning management systems, and reports from business systems) or large business meetings in order to quickly and consistently communicate and share information. Additionally, there was a general mindset that business decisions

need to be made efficiently so as to not impact critical business operations. This focus on efficiency contributed to a hesitancy to engage in richer forms of communication that are perceived to be less practical and efficient due to the increased time associated with their engagement. Learning managers, as well as their leadership, at times exhibited hesitancy regarding the increased time needed to engage in the richer forms of communication (e.g., knowledge sharing, face-to-face communication, seeking diversity of perspective, and engaging in open debate) that are integral to the EI approach. One way to overcome this hesitancy was by engaging learning managers in the communicative qualities of EI and demonstrating the value of this approach at the team level.

The systems and structures within this organization use traditional organizational systems and structures, such as business functions, departments, and roles, to organize the work, workers, and workplace. These resulted in fragmented collaboration, cooperation, and synergistic understandings of roles and responsibilities at not only the organizational level, but also the team level. Specifically, this team of learning managers was organized by product line; despite being in the same department and having similar roles and responsibilities, they were not readily engaging in intradepartmental collaboration, communication, and cooperation beyond team meetings or organizationally mandated projects, nor did they understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to each other. It was evident that systems and structures were not ideal with regards to their ability to facilitate Evaluative Inquiry efforts from an organizational infrastructural perspective. However, engaging learning managers in EI essentially introduced a system and structure

that could facilitate Evaluative Inquiry efforts by impacting conditions related to systems and structures, but at the team infrastructural level.

Leadership within this organization values and seeks diverse perspectives, supports continuous learning and team work, and engages personnel in and communicates organizational vision and goals. If this were not the case, it is unlikely that leadership would have granted the permission for a research study to be implemented. A small number of organizational leaders were engaged at the departmental level, so examining leadership conditions from an organizational perspective was beyond the scope of this case study. However, the researchers recognized that conditions associated with the leadership infrastructural component are also important to establish and promote at the team level, so this emerged as a focal point for the research.

The organizational infrastructure for this corporation can be described as readily supporting the use of teams for solving business-specific challenges and accomplishing business goals. Integrating EI and social learning processes at the team level represented a challenge to how a team generally operated within this organization. Specifically, teams tended to be more project- and task-based rather than learning-based. Additionally, the learning culture is conservative, individualist, and event-based in nature. This translates into a team culture that is not familiar with embedding organizational learning approaches into business processes and one that is more comfortable and familiar with traditional learning practices such as one-time learning events delivered via classroom-based training or eLearning modules.



The focus of the inquiry was on improving a learning department's internal needs assessment process and associated tools. The needs assessment topic was selected because it represented a business-critical work process that needed to be improved. Additionally, it provided an opportunity for this learning department to engage in both EI evaluation and learning processes and to influence their own team infrastructure through their participation.

Mid-level leadership in this learning department was familiar with research (i.e., Bersin) that reported the benefits and value of organizational versus traditional learning approaches. Specifically, they recognized the ability of organizational learning approaches to not only address individual learning, but also to enable team-based and organizational learning and action. Additionally, upper level leadership was interested in applying EI as an alternative approach that could help to identify and/or address inefficiencies in the learning managers' team-based infrastructure, as well as to drive more action on and accountability for using the needs assessment process and tools. Ultimately, this provided an opportunity to introduce EI as an organizational learning approach and to document how it influenced the nature of the team and its infrastructure.

### **Scope of Work**

The study was initiated by submitting a request for evaluating a departmental operating model to leadership. This operating model was originally developed in order to build consistency in key learning processes and procedures that this learning department (and learning managers) owned. It included topics such as: the identification of business and learning needs; the design, development, and implementation of various internal

learning solutions; and the evaluation of learning effectiveness. The operating model was lengthy and complex, so only one component of it—the needs assessment process and associated tools—was selected as the focus of the EI work. Although the needs assessment approach was the focus for EI activities, the purpose of this study was to explore how learning managers' experiences in engaging in the EI process impacted the team infrastructure (e.g., culture, leadership, communication, and system and structural components). This purpose was guided by two research questions: (1) what conditions do learning managers identify as contributing to the success of the team through the EI process; and (2) what EI infrastructural model components (e.g., culture, leadership, communication, and systems and structures) were present within the conditions identified by learning managers?

### **Researchers' Positions**

The research team consisted of three individuals. The first two team members were employees within the organization who had responsibilities dedicated to enabling learning excellence within this learning department and had responsibilities to educate and improve upon the capabilities of internal practitioners (i.e., learning managers). The third team member was a researcher from a local university who acted as an external consultant on Evaluative Inquiry. Based on discussions among these three team members, a decision was made to approach the organization to carry out a research study using Evaluative Inquiry. The two research team members who were employed by the organization approached leadership regarding the opportunity to apply Evaluative Inquiry within the organization. This was a natural extension of their job related to improving

learning excellence and offered a unique opportunity to apply this approach to learning within the department.

The two members employed by the organization served dual roles as participant observers and observer participants. As participant observers, members facilitated the EI process during working meetings and contributed our own individual thoughts and ideas at both working meetings and during participant debriefs. These members moved into a role as observer participants when conducting research. This typically occurred after participant debrief sessions and during researcher debriefs. The external consultant participated solely as an observer participant during working meetings and participant and researcher debriefs, where the main role was to observe, document, and do research.

### **Participants, Data Collection and Analysis**

**Participant selection.** There were 13 learning managers included in the original participant population for this case study. Each worked within the same learning department within the same US-based global corporation. As part of their regular responsibilities, each learning manager was required to utilize the standardized needs assessment approach. However, they were not required to participate in the study portion of this investigation, which included participating in participant debriefs and interviews to capture their experiences in engaging in the Evaluative Inquiry process. After the informed consenting process, 11 of the 13 learning managers agreed to participate in this study.

**Participant characteristics.** This group of learning managers was approximately 30 to 40 years old, included six females and five males, and represented eight different

ethnicities. Each member had at least five years of experience within the organization and had varying levels of understanding in performing needs assessments. Additionally, most did not hold formal degrees within the learning and development industry, but degrees in non-learning fields, such as business.

**Data collection.** The data collection methods used in this study included observation of formal working meetings, observation and audio recording of participant and researcher debrief meetings, and initial and follow-up interviews collected via a formal interview protocol. This dataset was analyzed in order to obtain a deeper understanding of emerging themes that represented the conditions that facilitated the EI process. These conditions were then associated with EI infrastructural model components present at the team level.

The Evaluative Inquiry approach was conducted over the course of seven months (October 2015-April 2016). This allowed adequate time for the natural iterations of Evaluative Inquiry processes to occur. Additionally, it provided the time needed to observe how EI influenced the nature of the team and its infrastructure, as well as learning outcomes.

During this time, learning managers participated in the working meetings that utilized the EI approach and used the needs assessment approach and tools that were developed from these meetings. After each formal discussion group meeting, the learning managers that had consented to participate in the research study were asked to participate in a 30-minute participant debrief meeting. The purpose of these debrief meetings was for learning manager participants to discuss and reflect on the nature of the

learning processes and their experiences regarding the Evaluative Inquiry process. After the Evaluative Inquiry process ended in April 2016, study participants were interviewed in order to obtain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Additionally, participants were encouraged to apply the needs assessment process within the organization. A brief monitoring phase was conducted during February-March 2017 (10 to 11 months after formally ending Evaluative Inquiry team meetings) to gauge learning manager application and any organizational learning that occurred around needs assessments.

Table 2 includes a summary of data collection instruments.

Table 2

*Infrastructural Components: Data Collection Instrument(s)*

<b>Procedure</b>	<b>Working Meeting</b>	<b>Debrief Meeting(s)</b>	<b>Interview (Initial)</b>	<b>Interview (Follow-up)</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	Discuss experiences, understandings, and provide feedback to the group about the needs assessment component of the GLO operating model; improve and standardize needs assessments component.	Debrief of bi-monthly meeting on the nature of the learning processes that occurred during previous working meeting(s).	Obtain a deeper understanding of participants' understandings and experiences during the study.	Obtain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences in applying the needs assessment product/process that was created.
<b>Frequency</b>	Monthly	Monthly	1x (2-3 months after final working meeting)	1x (10-12 months after final working meeting)
<b>Duration</b>	1 hour	30 min (participant) 30 min (researcher)	30 min	30 min
<b>Data Collection Instrument</b>	Narrative and/or Observation Protocol	Audio Recording; Narrative and/or Observation Protocol	Formal Interview Protocol; Audio Recording	Formal Interview Protocol; Audio Recording

**Data analysis.** The data analysis initially started by using a holistic approach to look for emerging themes that represented conditions that facilitated the EI process. This

initial analysis resulted in the identification of four major facilitating conditions: communication conduit, safety, building relationships, and empowerment. Once supporting evidence was obtained from the dataset and code segments finalized within their theme(s), a second level of analysis was conducted. This second level of analysis included an *a priori* analysis to determine which EI infrastructural model components (e.g., communication, culture, leadership, and systems and structures) were present at the team level within the dataset. The names of study participants that are provided in this article are pseudonyms.

Engaging in EI facilitated team members' understandings of elements within the organizational context. Elements of organizational infrastructure present in Preskill and Torres (1999a, 1999b) model served as the framework structure for *a priori* codes for examining the EI infrastructure components that learning managers identified as facilitating the EI process. For this study, the following code definitions were used when examining the data: (1) Culture [CUL] represented understandings regarding valuing of human capital, trust, failing safe and risk taking, speaking clearly and courageously, and valuing lessons learned around the needs assessment topic both within and outside of EI working meetings; (2) Leadership [LEAD] represented understandings related to valuing pluralism in redefining the needs assessment approach, continuously supporting learning around needs assessments, supporting systems and implementation avenues for sharing learning on needs assessments, valuing servant leadership over power-seeking behaviors, seeking and valuing external, as well as internal sources of needs assessment information, communicating their vision of needs assessments, but remaining inclusive in learning

managers' having a place in developing the vision, and finally in driving action based on the learning that occurred around the needs assessment approach, as well as championing continuous learning on needs assessments; (3) Communication [COMM] represented instances where needs assessment information was readily shared for the sake of learning, creating a knowledge-sharing atmosphere based on pluralism and the collective voice of learning managers, as well as providing opportunities for face-to-face communication by addressing concrete barriers (e.g., time, space, resources); and 4) Systems and structures [SS] represented understandings of how the EI process allowed members from various units to work together in a collaborative, cooperative environment to promote synergistic understandings and realizations of roles and responsibilities related to the needs assessment approach.

### **Findings**

Findings are presented to describe what conditions the learning managers identified as contributing to the team's success through the EI process. Additionally, the *a priori* coding of EI infrastructural components are presented within each condition findings. Presenting the findings in this manner allows for the connection between the identified conditions for success of the team and the role the EI process had in generating the infrastructure components contributing to the team's success. The results are not intended as an examination of how the external organization manifested these infrastructure components, but rather how, through using the EI process, these infrastructure components were manifested within the team.

## **Communication Conduit**

Communication conduit referred to the Evaluative Inquiry approach's creation of conditions for learning managers which supported communication occurring around the needs assessment approach. It enhanced communication and drove more question-asking behavior around the needs assessment approach and this occurred inside and outside of EI working meeting(s). It also provided additional insights into communication issues within the organization.

Engaging in the Evaluative Inquiry process required regular face-to-face meetings that promoted open communication. During the EI process, learning managers recognized shared obstacles to communication within the organization. This included items such as "stakeholder time/schedule," "workload," and "excessive travel." Learning managers recognized that the environment within which they worked did not place high priority or provide time or dedicated space for proactive forms of communication for the sake of learning and problem-solving. This indicated that they appreciated the use of the Evaluative Inquiry process as a forum through which to enhance their communication connections.

Learning managers described that, within the organization, coming together to communicate about a problem was not the norm and then explained how engaging in the EI approach was valuable.

...not done it [communication] free form at this company, [but has] done at other companies; open it up, pull it apart and put it back together [COMM], get worker



bees together this is [a] joint effort [SS]; [I see value] in implementing an approach such as this [EI] where you involve people in the work [SS]. (Catherine)

Learning managers also describe a lack of organizational support from a communication perspective and believe that the Evaluative Inquiry process provided the time and space to engage in constructive communication.

I think you are talking about communication; and if there is one thing, we are bad at is communication. I neglect communication sometimes, [it] does not come from bad intentions, but we are so focused, sometimes we forget to take a step a back [COMM]. (Marcus)

Engaging in the EI process established a communication conduit needed to facilitate the team's success. Learning managers indicated that participating in working group meetings expanded their understanding about needs assessments and that this was directly related to enhanced sharing among individuals on the team. Learning managers described how the EI approach was different than ways they had approached dealing with a problem or producing a product within this organization previously as "New, interesting, free flow conversation; haven't done something [like] this before [COMM], small group [SS] talking about processes and getting feedback [COMM], it is different" (Maria). Learning managers appreciated the Evaluative Inquiry process as a conduit that provided a means to disseminate information and to engage, listen, and learn from each other.

Learning managers indicated that the communications that occurred through the EI process was grounded in learning and sharing through an open and deep dialogue

versus a surface level and limited status quo discussion. The inquiry processes within the EI model focused the work of learning managers by providing a system and structure that supported communication.

I think that the reason it [EI process] is successful is because it gives us... a topic [SS] for conversation to communicate on [COMM] and collaborate [SS] on, so I think so much of our current team time [meetings outside of EI] I just automatically think of people sharing and talking about what they're doing, and that's not collaborative. It doesn't foster the kinds of discussions [COMM] that we're having here [in EI working meetings] [SS] and now [we] are seeing where each other's strengths are, et cetera. So, I think from that perspective, that's very helpful. (Emilee)

### **Safety**

Safety illustrated how within the Evaluative Inquiry process a “safe harbor” was created which provided the environment that allowed for the development of trust, risk-taking behaviors, and a “failing safe” experience. Preskill and Torres (1999a) stated that organizational cultures that create true learning organizations encourage “individuals to take risks without fear, by protecting and safeguarding their position and dignity, and by developing a climate of trust and courage” (p. 53). Learning managers recognized that the EI process enabled a safe environment.

I think it [EI] was a nice environment [SS], and I mean that everybody was feeling quite honest and calm [CUL]. And so, we were feeling free to talk about whatever you [EI facilitator] were asking. So, it was interesting to see that it was

for learning purposes at the end, so we were feeling free [to talk] [CUL]...

(Maria)

Findings from this study indicated that engaging in Evaluative Inquiry processes created safety that was not always felt by individuals when participating in other meetings where feedback is supposedly encouraged. This is representative of a cultural issue within this organization. Creating a culture of safety was facilitated in part by systems and structures that participants recognized as contributing to the safety culture, as well as in leadership qualities demonstrated at the team level, through the EI facilitator.

Participants indicated that systems and structures within the Evaluative Inquiry process provided a safe environment to bring up topics, issues, and understandings. These systems and structures included things such as frequency of meetings, democratic atmosphere, clear expectations for open participation and feedback, and an open-minded facilitator. Keisha explained that it was the “frequency of meetings that allowed for trust to grow, as well that it help[ed] not to have a hierarchy of people in the room,” and Marcus explained that having an open facilitator with an open mind helped create an environment to provide feedback.

Learning managers explained the importance of the EI facilitator in demonstrating and maintaining behaviors consistent with creating a safe environment for participants, as well as the impact of engaging with a facilitator that had demonstrated an inclusive and democratic leadership style where collective voice and sharing was encouraged for the sake of team learning.

I think from what I've observed you [EI facilitator] did a really nice job of setting the tone for those meetings in requesting feedback [LEAD] and knowing that we were building, working towards a desired outcome that we all shared and owned together [CUL] So, kudos to yourself [the facilitator] in setting an environment where people really felt okay [LEAD]. (Mary)

At the start of the EI process, expectations surrounding participation of all team members were communicated. This helped to establish a “safe” and inclusive environment for participants. During his initial interview, Isaac shared that expectations were set regarding the nature of EI meetings being trustful and allowing for courageous dialogue. He also alluded that it was unfortunate that these expectations needed to be reinforced within the broader business organization.

...come to an environment where you can provide feedback without retribution, without fear [CUL] trust and courage, right? So, we should live in an environment like that, and if you don't, then it's quite unfortunate that you have to come to a meeting where it's fully said I remember you saying at the beginning, too, saying, you know, this is an environment you can say whatever you want [LEAD]. (Isaac)

Isaac's above quote alludes to the fact that the broader organization isn't encouraging an open and trustful culture. Engaging in the EI process provided greater insights about the broader organizational culture with regard to safety, risk-taking, and fear of failure. It did this by providing a contrasting experience for learning managers,

one in which they experienced a safer and non-judgmental setting within the EI meetings themselves versus when they were in the larger organizational settings or meetings.

Researchers also observed the growing sense of safety and risk-taking behavior that evolved as learning managers continued to engage in the EI process, but not without continuous reinforcement by the EI facilitator that honest and open feedback was needed and wanted, particularly within the early stages of the EI process.

We're getting people together to talk. [SS] They want to learn from each other [COMM]. That's obvious but you're [EI facilitator] getting people together and telling people it's ok not to know something. It's ok not [to] be perfect at everything. It's ok to screw up [LEAD]. That's moving the culture [CUL].

(Researcher Debrief)

These experiences demonstrated that engaging in the EI process created a sense of safety for learning managers to openly collaborate and communicate on the needs assessment approach, as well as provided a space for learning managers to openly examine needs assessments in order to improve organizational functioning. Additionally, it demonstrated how leadership at the team level, in this case the EI facilitator, was essential in building and maintaining an inclusive environment that valued pluralism, as well as team engagement and diversity, as a path to continuous improvement and learning.

### **Building of Relationships**

The building of relationships referred to the ability of the Evaluative Inquiry approach to surface the presence, or absence, of inter- and intradepartmental relationships

and then facilitate the building of relationships at team and/or organizational levels. Specifically, results from this study demonstrated how EI processes provided greater insights about gaps in organizational systems and structures from a relational perspective and how understanding their presence (or absence) enhanced collaboration and communication.

Strong systems and structures (SS) that facilitate EI processes “support collaboration, communication, and cooperation among organization members, as well as across units or departments” (Preskill & Torres, 1999b, p. 55). Weak systems and structures can create a barrier to communication, networking, relationship building, and knowledge sharing. Learning managers essentially recognized that weak systems and structures were limiting critical business relationships and social interactions:

I honestly don't think it's about holding power or holding information [CUL]. I don't think the silos are about that. It happens because of the nature of the structure and the nature of the company and how it works [SS], but I don't think it's the people that are holding the information so it's only me that knows it. It's because of how we are structured and how we work [SS] that it doesn't allow for us to have the communication [COMM]. (Emilee)

Lack of collaboration, communication, and cooperation occurring between learning managers and their business partners represented a limited interdepartmental relationship. Through the EI process, learning managers openly engaged in dialogue and recognized fragmentation and gaps in organizational systems and structures from an organizational relationship perspective. These included budget control issues, lack of input on learning

plans, and lack of collaboration on needs assessments. Business partners that have control over these and often learning managers are not involved in decision-making. One learning manager anonymously via his/her reflection log described participating in the EI process as:

In my view one of the biggest barriers is where the learning budget lies – when it is in the hands of the [business partners] they will continue to ‘solve their own’ learning needs and our advice and consultation stays optional as opposed to a requirement or need [SS]. (Reflection log)

EI meetings increased learning managers’ awareness as to some of the issues that might prevent them from moving towards a more standardized needs assessment process within the organization, a lack of strong interdepartmental relationships between learning managers and their business partners emerged. Maria stated that “we’re pretty much viewed by [business partners] as an alternative for [using an external] vendor [but] not as a strategic partner”; Catherine stated that “it depends on the [business partner] because the [business] team will pull [the learning plan] together some include training and some don’t.” These findings indicated that learning managers were not consistently thought of as a strategic partner within various parts of the organization, even on processes such as creating learning plans and in conducting needs assessments.

Engaging in the EI process contributed to the improvement of relationships among this team of learning managers. Evaluative Inquiry itself became a team level system and structure that provided the supportive environment the learning managers needed for building better intradepartmental collaboration, communication, and

cooperation. Learning managers explained that the EI process had shifted their way of doing work and helped to facilitate the building and fostering of relationships with their fellow learning managers.

It's [EI process] helped to build relationships and foster relationships within the group and throughout the different conversations [COMM]. At the last meeting there was a different group of people [SS], but I've had a level of conversation with them that I probably have never had before [COMM]. Likewise, with the people that are at this meeting [SS] as well. So, that's me thinking about the Evaluative Inquiry process. (Emilee)

During Maria's initial interview she explained that the value she gained from engaging in the EI process had to do more so with the team relationship building aspect and not with only individual learning. She explained that her experience was "more than about the tool and importance of the first stage of the needs assessment, it was more about understanding each other and creating a relationship."

Learning managers applied the needs assessment approach outside of the EI working meetings. This represented improved relationships occurring at both the team and organizational level as evidenced by enhanced interdepartmental and intradepartmental collaboration, communication, and cooperation. From an interdepartmental perspective, researchers documented that learning managers were either now using the needs assessment approach with their business partners or at least intended to have a conversation with their business partners. Specifically, initial interviews with learning managers indicated that relationships were forming between



learning managers and business partners around the topic of needs assessments.

Catherine indicated that she had seen learning managers, outside of EI working meetings:

...collectively pushing back and saying ‘why’ [on training requests] [and that] it’s interesting to see that people are taking it [needs assessments] to heart and applying it, it’s not just talk. [COMM] I think there were two [learning managers’] that are definite – tried to do it, like the whole thing, and then other people were integrating into their conversations and turning it around [COMM].  
(Catherine)

From an intradepartmental perspective, Mary described a conversation she had with George in preparing for a needs assessment conversation with a stakeholder.

George and I were preparing to meet with the stakeholder [and George was contemplating] how would be a good way to describe it [needs assessment approach]. I said for me, it’s not so much that the stakeholder even has to know that [the] template exists. I’m much more comfortable if they don’t and just having a conversation understanding what type of information do we need to learn and gather. So I think that was the conversation we [George and Mary] had I just remember really well that we spent some time talking about that [COMM].  
(Mary)

## **Empowerment**

As the EI process progressed to the application phase, the learning managers assumed ownership of the process, resulting in a bottom-up development rather than a top-down driven approach to needs assessment. Engaging learning managers through the

EI process ensured their involvement in planning and implementing the needs assessment approach that resulted from their work (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). Engaging in the Evaluative Inquiry process resulted in learning managers exploring a new needs assessment approach and test tools generated by the team.

This process led to changes on the needs assessment approach that contributed learning, improved buy-in, and use by the learning managers and the organization. In describing what understandings, the team had reached around the needs assessment approach and tools as a result of participating in the EI process, Keisha explained:

I think that the fact that we're all contributing to feedback [LEAD] [COMM] and even though we created the template and so forth that you're asking for our input [LEAD] [COMM] that engages us to use it because it wasn't something as you stated was just handed out and say ah you just need to use it [LEAD] [CUL] We're all having input into the creation of all these templates [SS] [COMM].  
(Keisha)

Mary further explained that "I think we bring in some real world [perspective]...taking it from theory to application you know what it looks and sounds like when you are actually engaging with stakeholders which brings in a little more reality to our world." Through communications, leadership, and the structure of the EI process, learning managers created an environment that supported pluralistic dialogue that had not previously occurred for learning managers, resulting in a feeling of empowerment as learning managers became responsible for developing the needs assessment approach that would be employed by them within the organization. During her initial interview Keisha

explained that the EI process enabled a willingness for learning managers to participate, because it provided “the right environment” [SS]. Catherine explained that

Being able to participate in this way [SS], and to help make it ours, gave us that incentive to participate, and own it, and use it, and make it right because we were going to have something at the end that would help us, and we wanted to make it as useful as possible [CUL]. (Catherine)

Learning managers recognized that EI created a lesson learned team culture. This supports Preskill’s and Torres’s (1999a, 1999b) idea that an organizational learning culture is one in which there is value and emphasis placed on learning from mistakes. During an initial interview, Marcus explained “*The fact that it was mentioned ‘use that [needs assessment template], learn how to use that’ try it, like, even try to make [a] mistake, [then] come back, [and] try again [LEAD]. I think that was very productive approach [CUL].*”

Engaging in the EI process built an empowered momentum among the team to challenge the status quo. Sandee explained how the EI process empowered her to use the needs assessment template and the questions on the template to challenge existing practices with business partners.

[EI] empowers you to do it [needs assessments] [SS] because sometimes it is very necessary because you are not very aware of what they [stakeholders] want...I should really ask those questions and I should really go through the process even though they want it this way; challenge that. I think it makes you think about challenging it [COMM]. (Sandee)

In discussing her own experiences in working with a business partner and using the new needs assessment approach, Mary describes how this has created a partnership between learning manager and the business partner, increasing the value of conducting needs assessments prior to generating learning or performance solutions.

I think the value and working with our stakeholders is hopefully creating an expectation in terms of whether we move on to really pull out, to be challenged and questioned about what we're doing [CUL]. Is it truly a learning event, what are the needs, what are the outcomes? So I hope with the interactions that we're all now having with our stakeholders [COMM], it's increasing the level of value and expectations that comes along with whether it's not me that they're seeing anymore [or another learning manager and] the expectation is that this is the partnership [CUL]. (Mary)

In describing the benefits of the EI process from an organizational learning perspective, Mary describes a shift in empowerment with her business partner in which both parties now had equal footing in the partnership. Learning managers now had a stake in the process. Ultimately, this resulted in an empowered team of learning managers driving their own change at team and organizational levels.

### **Discussion**

Learning managers indicated that the EI process facilitated conditions including safety, communication conduit, building relationships, and empowerment which promoted learning about needs assessment and use on the needs assessment approach. Additionally, infrastructure components of the EI model were identified as occurring

within the EI process at the team level. Safety represented a trusting, risk taking, and permission to “fail safe” team environment, allowing for learning managers to openly and honestly express issues and understandings about applying the needs assessment approach. Communication conduit represented the enhanced communication that resulted from face-to-face meetings that allowed team members to communicate openly about needs assessments. The EI process improved intradepartmental and interdepartmental relationships as learning managers collaborated and communicated during EI meetings and applied the needs assessment approach within the organization. Through the EI process, learning managers gained a sense of empowerment as they took ownership in developing the needs assessment and challenged the status quo within the organization with regards to employing needs assessments.

Although not present at the start of the EI process, the facilitating condition safety was developed and reinforced through the creation of a culture that allowed for developing trust, risk taking behaviors, and a failing safe experience within team meetings. This aligns with Edmondson’s (1999) idea that psychological safety, or “interpersonal risk-taking” and team confidence to openly and honestly speak up, is a critical precursor to effective team functioning and learning. Additionally, Preskill and Torres (1999b) argued that enabling organizational learning through Evaluative Inquiry required risks “raising issues, asking questions, and making changes” and that it was these types of risks that were critical precursors to learning (p. 156). Ultimately, the process of EI enabled a safe adult learning environment within working meetings that promoted interpersonal risk taking among the team of learning managers.

Culture (CUL) was the infrastructural component inherent to the EI process that was most associated with promoting a safe learning environment among the learning managers. This supports Preskill's and Torres's (1999a, 1999b) idea that culture is what "underpins" individual's willingness to clearly and courageously take risks and to share and learn from each other from a position of openness and trust rather than defensiveness or fear. Without a sense of safety established within the EI working meetings, learning managers would most likely not have reported outcomes associated with trust, risk-taking behaviors, and failing safe experiences. This reinforces the critical connection between a fail-safe culture within an organization and organizational learning and transformational change (Anderson & Anderson, 2010).

Through the EI process, dedicated time and space for communication were established. This improved collaborative communication promoted a sense of safety among learning managers, as well as learning and problem-solving and the development of needs assessment tool(s). Within the EI model, communication promotes "learning from one another in ways that contribute to new insights and mutual understanding" (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, p. 54). This represented the communication (COMM) infrastructure component of the EI model.

The EI process brought together learning managers from across units to promote interdepartmental collaboration and cooperation on the development of a new needs assessment approach. This allowed for understandings and realizations about roles and responsibilities related to needs assessment to emerge from the collective and promoted the holistic development of a needs assessment tool. This represents the system and

structure (SS) infrastructure component within the EI model, as it “mediated organizations’ members ability to interact, collaborate, and communicate with each other and erased boundaries departments and units” (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, p. 54).

The infrastructural components inherent to the EI process that were most often associated with promoting improved relationships among learning managers were the communication (COMM) and systems and structures (SS) components. Specifically, enhanced communication within the EI process—the communication conduit—stimulated not only communication avenues, but the EI process itself provided a system and structure that helped to build or improve intradepartmental and interdepartmental relationships at both the team and organizational levels. As a system and structure, the EI process facilitated learning managers’ collaboration and communication; this helped them better understand each other’s similarities and differences with regards to knowledge, practices, and barriers. This aligns with Preskill’s and Torres’s (1999b) idea that “integrating systems and structures erase(s) boundaries between departments and units, eliminate(s) negative competition, and create(s) opportunities for learning and knowledge dissemination” (p. 173).

Preskill and Torres (1999a, 1999b) explained that traditional organizational structures can reinforce the fragmentation of work tasks and workers understanding of each other. Learning managers indicated that this fragmentation—or silos—existed at both team and organizational levels within the organization. However, learning managers described improved social interactions and relationships that emerged both inside and outside of EI working meetings. Specifically, learning managers displayed behaviors

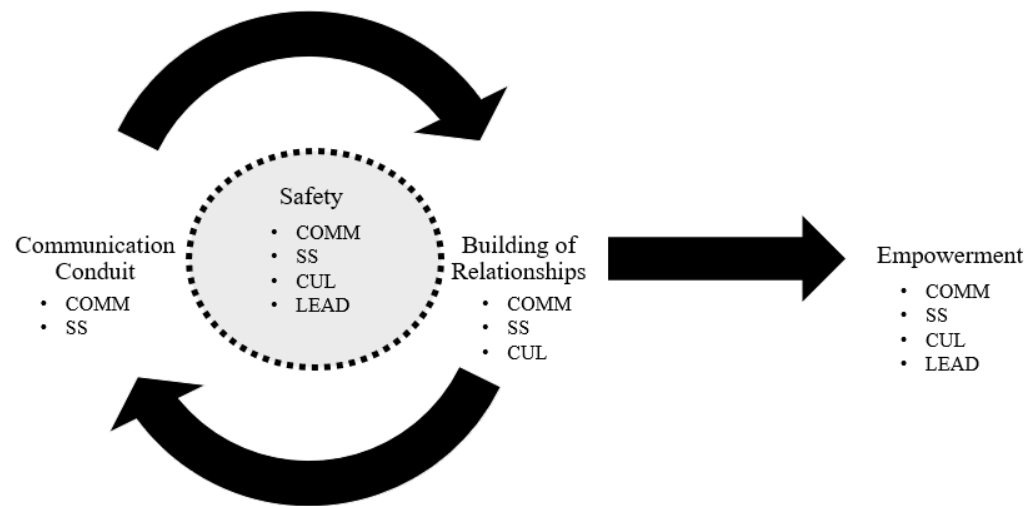
associated with relationship development when they began to reach out to and meet with other learning managers and/or to business partners outside of EI working meetings to collaborate, communicate, and cooperate on the needs assessment approach.

Findings indicated that all infrastructure components were present in the data for the empowerment theme. Although infrastructural components were associated with empowerment, results suggest that empowerment resulted from the three other themes: safety, communication conduit, and relationships. Through creating a safe environment where communication was increased and where learning managers worked together as a team to form relationships, this led to learning managers feeling empowered to create, implement and champion the needs assessment approach within the organization. This suggests that the EI process fosters infrastructural components that led to empowerment. Empowerment was not only present within the EI process allowing learning managers to create new processes and tools for needs assessment but was present as learning managers challenged current practices of working with business partners in conducting needs assessments prior to determining learning and performance solutions. Infrastructure components promoted empowerment both within the EI process, as well as outside working meetings where learning managers championed the needs assessment approach and challenged the status quo within the broader organization. This aligns with Preskill's and Torres's (1999a) perspective that Evaluative Inquiry supports learning that is shared beyond the individual and team level.

Learning managers' experiences with Evaluative Inquiry were that the process generated conditions that promoted success. By establishing a safe environment, we



increased communication and relationship building within the working group. The generation of these three conditions ultimately led to the outcome of learning managers feeling empowered within and outside of the EI process. Our results indicated that all infrastructural components (CUL, COMM, SS, and LEAD) were present within the EI process at the team level and contributed to the conditions identified by learning managers. The EI process itself served as a system and structure that allowed for team infrastructural components to emerge. Specifically, the working group meetings brought the learning managers together. The internal mechanisms of the EI process promoted open and collaborative communication, increased a sense of safety, improved intra-departmental relationships, and enabled team-level leadership. Ultimately, these resulted in empowerment at the team level as a key outcome. Specifically, empowered learning managers that owned, communicated, and disseminated their needs assessment approach. Figure 4 is a representation of the interaction between conditions, infrastructural components, and empowerment as a key outcome. This suggests a possible addition to the EI model that while existence of infrastructural components in the broader organizational context may help facilitate successful use of EI. It is also important to recognize that successful use of the Evaluative Inquiry model requires the nurturing of these infrastructural components within the EI process. Creating organizational learning takes work and time. Using Evaluative Inquiry as one approach to promoting organizational learning can influence the larger organizational infrastructure helping to promote organizational change and promoting an organizational learning environment (Preskill & Torres, 1999a).



*Figure 4.* Interaction between Conditions, Infrastructural Components, and Outcome

Study results need to be considered relative to the limitations of the study design.

As a case study, results are limited to one unique organization and group of individuals.

Specifically, the organizational context related to the infrastructure external to the team might differ across organizations and thus findings might differ from our findings.

Additionally, two researchers were employees of the organization where the study was conducted, as well as part of the EI team. This could contribute to bias with regard to interpretation of findings. However, this was balanced by the participation of a third researcher in the study that was not a member of the organization.

### **Conclusion**

Our research provides a case example of using Evaluative Inquiry within a business setting that resulted in direct evidence that infrastructural components can be generated and promoted through the internal EI process at the team level. We were able to identify conditions experienced by participants that can be associated with all organizational infrastructural components. Our findings indicated that certain conditions

were generated because of the mechanisms of action inherent to the internal EI process and not necessarily because of the presence or absence of certain qualities associated with the surrounding organizational context.

The EI process provided a means for infrastructural components to emerge at the team level and contributed to the identified conditions that supported team success.

While the EI model proposes that supporting Evaluative Inquiry efforts is primarily an external event, our findings indicate the EI approach itself can be self-sustaining by generating and promoting these conditions internally as the team carries out the process.

We suggest that further research be conducted to better understand team qualities and conditions when carrying out the EI process, as well as their interactions with and impact on team and organizational infrastructure and learning.

## CHAPTER IV

### ARTICLE III: APPLYING EVALUATIVE INQUIRY: EXPERIENCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FIELD

#### **Abstract**

In this article, I share our experience with and provide guidance to learning professionals and practitioners on how to implement an Evaluative Inquiry (EI) organizational learning model in a business setting. EI is a great example of how evaluation and social learning processes can be used to provide a semi-structured backbone to informal, socially-based learning which promotes individual, team, and organizational learning. Socially-based learning in the context of EI is not about the delivery method (e.g., blog, Facebook), but it is about engaging in learning through social learning interactions such as: reflection about a topic, dialogue between colleagues to gain clarity, or open questioning with the goal to understand. After introducing the EI model, I describe how we applied Evaluative Inquiry to a business case. I share experiences and guidance from the field which highlight benefits, challenges, and lessons learned that can be used as guiding principles for promoting, planning, implementing, and maintaining EI such that it is more readily accepted by key stakeholders (e.g., leadership, participants). Finally, I share additional items to consider that are not part of the formal EI model.

## **Introduction**

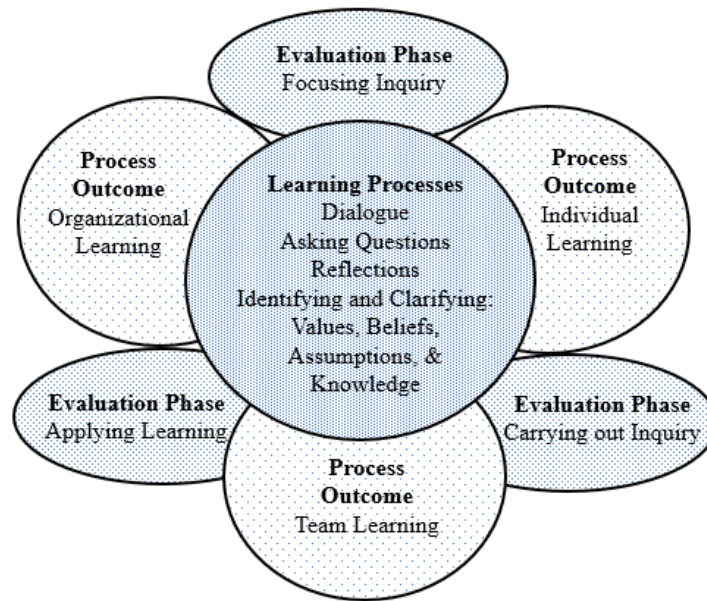
In today's knowledge economy, organizations require agile and fluid learning approaches in order to keep up with ever-changing learning and performance needs. Evaluative Inquiry (EI) is an organizational learning model (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b) which offers agile and fluid approaches to facilitating learning and performance through collaborative and continuous learning activities.

While we can learn as individuals, we also learn within social contexts. Social contexts influence an individual's knowledge, values, beliefs, and assumptions. Evaluative Inquiry provides a process and creates an environment for challenging the status quo that can lead to a change in mindset of both individuals and organizations.

### **Our Roadmap – Evaluative Inquiry Model**

Evaluative Inquiry provides a framework for groups to collaboratively engage in informal learning through social interactions. During the focus the inquiry phase of EI, participants define and deepen their understanding of the nature of the problem leading to clarity and understanding of what they want to accomplish. Carrying out the inquiry phase allows the team to identify and define processes or product that can more effectively work to address the defined problem. Finally, teams test their improved process or products during the apply phase and engaging in continuous improvement around these product or processes. Figure 5 is a representation of an adapted Evaluative Inquiry model. It was adapted to explicitly communicate that inquiry processes are a form of evaluation, a concept that practitioners are very familiar with. Additionally,

organizational infrastructural components surrounding the EI model were removed because of the focus on only the social learning processes and evaluation phases.



*Figure 5. Adapted Evaluative Inquiry Model*

### **Structure of Evaluative Inquiry – Evaluation Phases**

Evaluative Inquiry is implemented through three evaluation phases: (1) focusing the inquiry, (2) carrying out the inquiry, and (3) applying learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). It is through these iterative phases where evaluation and learning approaches and practices merge.

#### **Focusing the Inquiry**

At the start of an EI project the team must first focus the inquiry on an existing organizational need or problem where a decision or course of action must be taken. Once determined, the team needs to generate an agreed-upon problem statement and or list of evaluation questions that will guide the process (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b).

### **Carrying out the Inquiry**

Next the EI team needs to dig deeper to identify the root cause of the problem. Through collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and communicating information, the team can come up with a set of actionable insights which carry into the next phase of EI.

### **Applying Learning**

In this phase, group members identify and agree upon the best possible action(s) generated in the previous phase and develop an action plan to apply within the organization. In doing so, the group takes full ownership of their learning through action.

### **Engine of Evaluative Inquiry – Social Learning Processes**

Evaluative Inquiry uses four social learning processes to drive the interaction among group members: (1) dialogue, (2) asking questions, (3) reflection, and (4) identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b).

#### **Dialogue**

Groups must engage in open, honest, collaborative, and non-judgmental dialogue in order to challenge their own ways of knowing and doing (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). It is through this type of dialogue where they will challenge their existing perspectives, thinking and gaining new insight.

#### **Asking Questions**

Questioning helps to identify organizational issues, validate knowledge, cultivate a culture of discovery, and challenge current status quo (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). When group members ask each other questions, it offers them an opportunity to

pause and reflect versus simply acting without considering what the appropriate action is to take.

### **Identifying and Clarifying Values, Beliefs, Assumptions, and Knowledge**

In identifying values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge, individuals and teams surface and examine their existing mindsets regarding the problem identified, as well as any potential solutions to the problem. Individuals become more conscious of their prior thinking through this examination. This builds greater tolerance and understanding between group members (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b).

### **Reflection**

Individuals engage in reflection to contemplate their own and others' values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge around a topic (Preskill & Torres, 1999a, 1999b). Reflection provides an opportunity for individuals and teams to work through cognitive dissonance as they contemplate and reconcile changes in their own and others' values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge.

### **Our Journey Begins**

Our global learning department had a problem. Leadership had put a lot of effort into creating an operating model and had hoped that a cookbook-style document would provide a job aid that the learning managers could follow. Even with this cookbook, learning managers (LMs) were still not performing their roles consistently. This meant that the operating model was nothing more than a 360-page doorstop. We were given the responsibility to help learning managers use this cookbook. We recognized that learning managers were not implementing or using the operating model; we needed a process that



would engage all stakeholders in identifying the problems and generating the solutions regarding the operating model. We also understood that traditional learning methods and static methods of introducing the operating model were not working. We understood the need and having studied the EI model, this felt like the perfect opportunity to put it into practice within an organization.

We approached our departmental leadership with a request to engage learning managers in Evaluative Inquiry. During our initial conversation we explained that Evaluative Inquiry could remove barriers to learning through social engagement and ultimately drive action and change. We explained we would not focus on the entire operating model but address one aspect—needs assessments—which we identified as a pain point for the learning department. Thus, the needs assessment approach became the topic of focus for our EI work.

With leadership buy-in a core team was established to lead the EI process. As a core team, we created a set of questions to guide initial discussions with the learning managers around why they struggled with applying the needs assessment approach. Table 3 illustrates our focus the inquiry questions. We created a project plan to help with logistics; however, we recognized very quickly that the EI process requires agility and frequent adjustment. Materials were created to educate the learning managers on the purpose, process, benefits, and expectations and norms of Evaluative Inquiry. These were communicated at a kickoff meeting.

Table 3

*Focus the Inquiry Questions*

Focus the Inquiry Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Under what conditions or in what circumstances would we want to conduct needs assessments?</li> <li>2. How do needs assessments fit in with global processes – what is working and not working?</li> <li>3. How has the organization supported and/or prevented the use of needs assessments – supports and barriers?</li> </ol>

**Our Experience with the Evaluation Inquiry Process**

The first meetings were focused on familiarizing the learning managers with the focus inquiry questions. This gave the team the opportunity to validate needs assessments as a true pain point. Building the trust in the group occurred slowly at first and LMs were reluctant to participate in the discussion. While the group addressed situations that required a needs assessment, they were hesitant to share their experiences. To facilitate an environment of safety we shared our own experience and understanding of needs assessments in order to build a supportive trusting environment. This strategy worked, as we noticed the group felt an increased comfort in sharing their thoughts with each subsequent meeting:

When people spoke this time you could see that they had thought about what they were saying and they spoke with a greater level [of] self-identity and self-confidence and now I feel part of the process versus the last time the conversation was a little bit more disjointed and the comments were a break in the conversation

cause people were like wait, did I say something wrong [was I] completely off.

(Facilitator Debrief)

Once the group felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, barriers related to budget and learning plan ownership surfaced. One learning manager mentioned that stakeholders see the learning department as a last resort when there is no budget for an external vendor.

It quickly became apparent that experiences and perspectives were diverse and learning managers experienced pain points differently. The diversity of perspectives arose from dialogue as learning managers asked questions, reflected, and confirmed their own thoughts and experiences, listened to others' opinions, and sought clarification on the different values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge related to needs assessments.

A deepening of understanding occurred during the next set of meetings. As we spent time clarifying terms, defining the process, and identifying what makes up a part of a needs assessment, the group determined that a guide was needed to support them when conducting needs assessments. The team reviewed the existing documents in the 360-page operating model and determined that it was inadequate and too formulary of a perspective. One LM went so far as to refer to the documents as tax forms. Through our use of the EI process, the managers become comfortable addressing the elephant in the room—a needs assessment process that did not work for them. As learning managers engaged in social learning processes, the dynamic of the group began to change. The team began to contemplate the why and how around the needs assessment approach. The

team questioned and challenged their own and others' behaviors related to using needs assessments.

I think we think differently. I am always asking more [questions]. It's like, I always have this stuff in the back of my mind now, and I go to meetings, it's like, I guess it's driving me to ask more questions, just on a very high level, and then specific, if there is the opportunity to be able to shape the learning, then you go full-fledged into this [the needs assessment approach]. (Emilee<sup>1</sup>)

The group began to anticipate how they needed to change, and discussions naturally progressed to how as a group they wanted the needs assessment process to occur and what tools were needed to carry it out.

We might have different ideas of needs assessment, we might have a different technique, to gather all goals assessment [but] I think overall, we [now] have like a mutual understanding of needs assessment. (Nicholas)

At this point, the needs assessment approach became something that they owned versus something that they had been given to do. This shift in mindset continued into further meetings as the team became empowered to develop a needs assessment approach that would not only support their work but could have impact on the organization. We would like to note here that this shift in mindset took time and would not have been possible without the social learning processes that occurred during regular working meetings where the EI model was used.

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<sup>1</sup>Names of all learning manager participants are pseudonyms.

Through the EI process, the LMs worked collaboratively to create a new job aid that they would test during the applying learning phase of the EI model. Through dialogue and the other social learning processes, the team found a collective voice and valued the shared meaning and understanding that arose from their work.

I think that the fact that we're all contributing to feedback and even though we created the template and so forth that you're asking for our input that engages us to use it because it wasn't something just handed out [and we are told] you just need to use it. We're all having input into the creation of all these templates.

(Maria)

Learning managers applied the needs assessment template from the operating model into their workplace in order to understand what was working and what was not. This occurred as we moved into the applying learning phase. The EI core team developed an action plan which included a set of reflection questions shown in Table 4. These helped the learning managers reflect on their experience using the new needs assessment approach and template tool. While applying the new approach and templates, team members were able to bring back valuable insights that served as the foundation for more collective dialogue. Through applying the template, they identified areas of improvement that led to a template that was more of a visual guide to performing needs assessments. They also realized that the needs assessment could be used beyond meetings with stakeholders (i.e., planning purposes prior to meeting with stakeholders). The learning managers began thinking beyond the topic itself and were thinking about their role in applying needs assessment in the business and the impact it could have. Embedding EI

within the business practices made a powerful impact by driving action and change and was beginning to influence organizational learning.

Table 4

*Applying Learning Questions*

Applying Learning Questions
<p>As you use these templates, reflect on and document your experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are template(s) broad enough to be used?</li> <li>• What components of template(s) are working for you? Why or Why Not?</li> <li>• What solutions can you offer for improving components/sections of template(s)?</li> <li>• Were there processes in template(s) that are beyond your control/sphere of influence?</li> </ul>

Our learning managers took action by applying their learning on the needs assessment approach within the organization and with their business partners. They used their individual learning around needs assessment to engage differently with their business partners. In some cases, learning managers successfully influenced their business partners to apply the needs assessment approach and template:

I am in negotiation [with my business partner and I stated] guys we need this [template] to develop – to develop this content. They said there is no need to know [but I stated] I have a need, and this is a template [and was able to negotiate its completion because I had] evidence because you can't negotiate with other functions [business partners] without having evidence. And this is the evidence you have [needs assessment template and approach]. (Nicholas)

The action-oriented activities of the applying learning phase helped drive the loops of continuous improvement around the needs assessment approach and continued to facilitate individual and team learning.

### **Experience and Guidance from the Field**

Based on our experience, we identified four principles we think will help practitioners when using the EI process. These principles are: (1) Connect to Organizational and Individual Struggle; (2) Build an Environment of Safety; (3) Success Depends on a Democratic and Self-Aware Facilitator; and (4) Add a Component of Self-Reflection to Deepen Learning. See Appendix for an aggregate summary of these principles.

#### **Principle 1: Connect to Organizational and Individual Struggle**

When choosing a topic to focus the inquiry, make sure that it represents a “pain point” within the organization. This allows the focus of the EI process to be on alleviating the pain point and driving change to address important organizational struggles. One way we connected to organizational struggle was by identifying business needs, goals, and initiatives that were important to departmental leaders. This helped us to garner leadership support (e.g., time, space, personnel) for using the EI process to address individual and team pain points related to needs assessments. Once identified, we were able to use the information to guide our topic selection and to align our problem statement and evaluation questions.

The topic selected should also be relevant to individual participants and connect to their individual struggle. This provides participants with reasons to engage in the EI

process by giving them a stake in the problem. We identified and further clarified learning managers' struggles during the focus the inquiry phase and this helped us to better understand the problem from their perspective and to confirm the topic as important to them personally. During the focus the inquiry phase, the EI process allowed the team to obtain a mutual understanding that they shared similar struggle(s). This provided us with a better understanding from a team perspective, which was useful for understanding the problem more holistically. Table 5 provides a summary of this principle.

Table 5

*Principle 1: Connect to Organizational and Individual Struggle*

Principle(s)	Guidelines	Associated Process(es)
Principle 1: Connect to Organizational and Individual Struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize to key stakeholders (e.g., leaders, EI participants) that a key benefit of the EI process is to drive change around business needs or problems.</li> <li>• Identify business needs, goals, and initiatives from an individual and organizational perspective and select topic accordingly.</li> <li>• Select topic(s) that are relevant to EI participants and gives them a reason to engage in the EI process.</li> <li>• Use the focus the inquiry evaluation phase to further clarify "pain points" associated with organizational and individual struggle.</li> <li>• Use the focus the inquiry phase to develop mutual understanding of pain points.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning &amp; Design</li> <li>• Focus the Inquiry</li> </ul>

**Principle 2: Build an Environment of Safety**

The success of Evaluative Inquiry efforts depends on building a safe environment to develop trust, risk-taking behaviors, and a fail-safe experience. It is important to build



trust early in the focus the inquiry phase and work to maintain the trust throughout the EI process.

Engaging in social learning can be intimidating. If participants do not perceive the environment to be safe, they are more likely to engage in surface level or status quo discussion and unlikely to engage in deeper and more meaningful levels of dialogue and debate. A safe environment generates interactions of diverse thoughts, ideas, and perspectives allowing participants to contrast their preconceived notions to others in order to gain new perspectives.

We applied this principle by recognizing and acknowledging that learning managers were new to the project, the EI process, and to us as EI facilitators. Learning managers had never gone through the EI process before, so we developed a set of materials to communicate and educate them on the EI process, as well as shared its benefits and impact. We dedicated planning time to investigate organizational pain points (principle 1) which were shared with learning managers at the EI kickoff meeting. This communicated a clear “why” for the project. It also set expectations and established the value and credibility of the project.

As EI facilitators, we were able to establish an environment of safety by modeling our own vulnerabilities and admitting our own insecurities on the business topic. By modeling our own vulnerabilities through self-reflection, we sought to demonstrate a non-judgmental and open environment. Additionally, we allowed for moments of silence, encouraging discussion to emerge from the group versus being led by us. In addition, we developed a set of critical questions and examples in advance to help for

moments when dialogue stalled. We actively sought all perspectives by asking for participation from all team members. We sought to create the norm of open, respectful, and honest dialogue during working meetings. A summary of this principle is found in Table 6.

Table 6

*Principle 2: Build an Environment of Safety*

Principle(s)	Guidelines	Associated Process(es)
Principle 2: Build an Environment of Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create materials to communicate and educate participants on the EI process, including its benefits and impact.</li> <li>• Present materials in initial kickoff meeting to establish project credibility and value.</li> <li>• Explain the project “why” and create clear expectations of the outcomes and norms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning &amp; Design</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage, support, and model qualities associated with creating a safe environment (e.g., trust, risk-taking, non-judgement, active listening)</li> <li>• Use aspects of self-reflection to demonstrate authenticity in message(s).</li> <li>• Encourage open, respectful, and honest dialogue.</li> <li>• Ask everyone in the room for their perspectives.</li> <li>• Actively plan for and determine how to maintain momentum and engagement throughout the EI process.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prepare critical questions and think about examples to share and then use to prime stalled dialogue.</li> <li>○ Allow time for thought and responses – quiet is okay, do not talk right away.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus the Inquiry</li> <li>• Carrying Out the Inquiry</li> <li>• Applying Learning</li> </ul>

**Principle 3: Success Depends on a Democratic and Self-Aware Facilitator**

Evaluative inquiry is a facilitated process; its success depends on the qualities and approach used by the EI facilitator. It is democratic in nature and therefore requires a democratic style of facilitation. It also requires self-awareness that the EI process will transform the participants' and the EI facilitator's thinking, especially if the EI facilitator is internal to the organization and familiar with the topic.

Being an effective and democratic EI facilitator means reflecting on the role, as open, dynamic, and empowering, prior to leading EI working group meetings. For example, we had expert knowledge of the needs assessment topic, and it was helpful to draw on this for the analysis and interpretation activities. However, remembering that a key purpose of EI is to engage in dialogue and challenge our own thinking, we kept an open mind and checked our own pre-conceived notions about the needs assessment topic at the door. This allowed us to look at the topic from multiple perspectives and angles. For me, approaching the facilitation of the EI process with an open mind allowed me to transform my own knowledge and thinking into new insights and understanding. Ultimately, I recognized that, as much as Evaluative Inquiry was a process of continuous improvement, it was also a process of self-transformation. Part of being a successful democratic EI facilitator is allowing participants ideas to self-evolve. This can be done through allowing for silence during dialogue and asking open-ended and genuine questions (principle 2) both to the participants, and to you as a participant. Table 7 includes a summary of this principle.

Table 7

*Principle 3: Success Depends on a Democratic and Self-Aware Facilitator*

Principle(s)	Guidelines	Associated Process(es)
Principle 3: Success of Evaluative Inquiry Depends on a Democratic and Self-Aware Facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remember that a key purpose of EI is to engage in dialogue that challenges thinking of all participants, including the EI facilitator.</li> <li>If you are the EI facilitator, reflect on your role as an open, dynamic, and empowering facilitator prior to leading EI working group meetings. Remember to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep an open mind.</li> <li>Check pre-conceived notions at the door; particularly if there is familiarity with the topic.</li> <li>Examine your own knowledge from multiple perspectives and angles.</li> <li>Allow others' ideas to lead the discussion without influencing through your own voice.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus the Inquiry</li> <li>Carrying Out the Inquiry</li> <li>Applying Learning</li> </ul>

**Principle 4: Add a Component of Self-Reflection to Deepen Learning**

In order to deepen learning, participants require the opportunity to engage in self-reflection that focuses on what they are learning about themselves, the EI process, and the focus of the inquiry. This represents a reflection on meta-learning surrounding their participation in EI. This is not a component of Preskill and Torres's (1999b) EI model, although we found it provides the team an opportunity to deepen their understanding and learning. Self-reflection allows learning managers to focus on the how and why of their new understandings in learning. Through the self-reflection time, learning managers consciously dissected their learning, allowing them to deepen their learning on the topic.

These were useful for digging deeper into internal processes that participants may have experienced during the meeting, but were not readily apparent (i.e., reflections, unasked questions, delayed reactions/comments). Additionally, we found these useful because we were able to hear gaps in learning managers' thinking, which was useful for developing questions for future meetings. Putting a structure in place (i.e., debrief meetings) provided learning managers with time and dedicated space to engage in self-reflection. Debrief meetings were successful because they occurred following working meetings and engaged participants in real time. This principle is summarized in Table 8.

Table 8

*Principle 4: Add a Component of Self-Reflection to Deepen Learning*

Principle(s)	Guidelines	Associated Process(es)
Principle 4: Add a Component of Self-Reflection to Deepen Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debrief meetings foster meta-learning for Evaluative Inquiry team members</li> <li>• Schedule debrief meetings for participants to reflect on their learning.</li> <li>• Facilitators can use debrief meetings as an opportunity to identify gaps in learning or EI processes that can be addressed in future meetings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus the Inquiry</li> <li>• Carrying Out the Inquiry</li> <li>• Applying Learning</li> </ul>

### **Additional Considerations for Your Journey**

Evaluative Inquiry is a useful model, but as models go, it requires adjustments to implement within a real-world environment. Here are four suggestions that we think are important to consider prior to implementing EI into your own organization: 1) establish

EI core team; 2) leverage project management practices; 3) select appropriate delivery method; and 4) create engagement strategy.

### **Establish Evaluative Inquiry Core Management Team**

Evaluative Inquiry does not differentiate an EI core management team from the team engaging in the processes of EI. We found using an EI core management useful, because it allowed us to better address the evolutionary nature of EI and the messiness of running an informal approach to learning. Additionally, it was beneficial in keeping the team of learning managers focused on engaging with the topic at hand versus the extraneous “distractions” that could have impacted our group effectiveness and efficiency. Without a core management team, we might have not realized we needed to change course when we did.

### **Leverage Project Management Practices**

This process is embedded into the business and impacted by day-to-day business operations and needs. This results in the need to manage items such as: scheduling conflicts, levels of participation, materials, communication, and support beyond meetings.

### **Select Appropriate Delivery Method**

Face-to-face (F2F) is the preferred delivery method for EI but consider integrating technological solutions where you can see/talk to people (e.g., video conferencing) in cases where F2F is not feasible. Select delivery methods that will maximize participation.

We insisted that our EI participants attend meetings F2F even though they were a global team that traveled a lot and therefore would not always be on site. This was because our core team's intentions were founded on the idea that F2F communications allowed for richer and more dynamic dialogue. However, we could have benefitted from a more conscious effort toward removing barriers through alternate delivery methods so that members of this global team could participate more often than they did.

### **Create Engagement Strategy for Process**

Identify how to engage stakeholders and maintain momentum throughout the EI initiative. Use methods to engage people, such as incentives to participate or an on-going marketing message that communicates the benefits of participating or the results. Communicate benefits at a kick-off meeting and on-board new members as they join.

In order to maintain the application of learning from EI, it is important to engage leadership in supporting the application of learning that results from EI. This includes removing barriers to apply learning and setting expectations to use learning on the job. As data and insights evolve, communicate these and share how people (e.g., leaders, other stakeholders) are reacting to the information that the EI team is generating. Collectively, these can help to maintain momentum and support among organizational leaders.

### **Conclusion**

Our work within Evaluative Inquiry provided an opportunity to impact our organizational struggle through informal learning. It offered a social-based, informal learning approach that allowed individual, team, and organizational learning to occur, as

well as drove change and facilitated continuous improvement around the needs assessment process. From our experiences using the EI process we identified four principles that other practitioners should consider when using EI within their own organization. Additionally, we provide considerations to help practitioners implement EI within a business and industry setting.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### **Synthesizing a Three-Article Dissertation**

The three articles comprising my dissertation build upon one another to create a comprehensive view of Evaluative Inquiry (EI) as an organizational learning model and inquiry-based learning approach. Article 1 demonstrates the potential of the social learning processes identified in the EI model to facilitate and promote meaningful individual and team learning outcomes that can lead to organizational learning outcomes. It offers researchers, professionals, and practitioners in the learning and development field a comprehensive view of how engaging adult learners in social learning processes can promote deeper levels of learning, such as a mindset shift and behavioral change, by examining these through a lens of transformational learning theory and adult learning and development. Rather than holistically exploring the Evaluative Inquiry model, this piece concentrated specifically on the central mechanism of action of learning within the Evaluative Inquiry process, the social learning processes. The intention is to provide a more complex understanding of how social learning processes promote individual, team, and organizational learning.

Article 2 demonstrates how engaging in the EI process has the potential to promote conditions and infrastructural components within the EI process itself and leads to team-level success that can occur despite the presence or absence of infrastructural

components at the organizational level. It offers learning-based researchers, professionals, and practitioners a broad look at how engaging adult learners in organizational and inquiry models of learning such as EI has the capacity to generate and promote certain conditions and infrastructural components by examining infrastructural components through a team-level versus organizational lens. This piece did not holistically explore the EI model, concentrating instead on the four infrastructural components as they occurred within the Evaluative Inquiry process rather than outside of it. The intention is to provide a complex understanding of what conditions and infrastructural components can be created through the EI process at the team level.

Article 3 brings together empirical findings and experiences from exploring the use of the EI model within a business setting to inform learning professionals and practitioners about practices regarding promoting, planning, implementing, and maintaining an Evaluative Inquiry approach within their own setting. The first two articles argue in favor of EIs' ability to facilitate and promote meaningful individual and team learning outcomes that can lead to organizational learning outcomes and in favor of the ability to promote conditions and infrastructural components within the EI process that can lead to team-level success. These arguments cannot be substantiated without bringing this knowledge to learning professionals and practitioners who are responsible for leading, influencing, designing, and developing learning programs and curricula. Article 3 acknowledges and values the importance of making research relevant and accessible to practitioners. Specifically, it emphasized experiences and recommendations from the field in terms of useful principles and suggestions, which provides practitioners

with more flexibility in selecting and implementing principles and suggestions most meaningful to them, rather than presenting Evaluative Inquiry as a rigid, prescribed process. This promotes practitioner relevance by valuing their own agency as learning professionals to make any project, programmatic, curricular, and instructional decisions that best fit their needs. Presenting this work as a narrative also makes information more accessible to practitioners who are interested in shorter, implementable ideas and actions.

### **Personal Reflections on the Dissertation Process**

I am sitting here right now contemplating how I describe in so many words an experience, a journey really, which has changed me so deeply – as a student, a researcher, a practitioner, and as a person. This is my attempt to share my doctoral and dissertation journey with you, one that for me was not only educational, but transformative.

I think back to one of my first classes in my doctoral program at Loyola and one of my professors saying that he was not the same person after completing his doctorate and that he grew in ways beyond just the subject area itself. He explained that we too would change in more ways than one. This really impacted me, and I remember thinking, I wonder who I will be when I am done with this program. How will I change? How will I grow? I even thought will I even make it through the program given the realities of being an older, adult part-time, commuter student with a demanding full-time job and the logistical, financial, and mental demands that I knew would come along with my decision to pursue my dream of obtaining a doctoral degree. Well, that professor told our class this almost eight years ago now, and here I am. I made it and he was right, I am not even close to who I was at the beginning.

In order to understand my journey, I need to first describe who I was at the beginning of this program. As a beginning doctoral student, I knew I was passionate about and interested in curriculum and instruction. I had a master's degree in Instructional Design and Technology, had been a practitioner in the field for a decade, and had a lot of experience in designing and developing curriculum and instruction. I knew I was content and knowledge strong, but what I recognize now is that I was not very confident in thinking of myself as an equal to my professors, my managers at my company, or even to other students in my classes. In the beginning of my doctoral program I remember being fearful to contribute my thoughts to class discussion. What if I was wrong? I remember being nervous when I publicly presented my project work. What if someone disagreed? I remember expressing my hesitancy to another professor and he said, Marie, to deny who you are, to not share and express your thoughts, is to deny God. Okay, I grew up in a public education system, and went to state schools, so I was not used to an educator sharing something with me that was religious and spiritual in nature.

This 20-minute conversation profoundly impacted my path forward. For the first time ever, I felt empowered and began to believe in myself and to behave as an equal. I no longer wanted to deny myself the opportunity to contribute my thoughts and ideas with others based on my own fear. I recognized that I had something valuable to give back and needed to contribute my knowledge, experience, and thoughts in order to spur my own growth. It influenced me to engage more in discussions and helped me to build my confidence in presenting my thoughts and ideas in both the classroom and in the

workplace. I still find myself taking this advice to heart. In fact, as someone who is about to receive a doctoral degree, I recognize that I have an even greater responsibility to share and to give back.

After completing my coursework, I was excited to engage in my own research. As a practitioner, I was proud that I was giving back to the very organization that had financially supported my doctoral work, as well as provided me with flexibility on the job to attend classes and to conduct research. As a researcher, I felt prepared to conduct research. I understood important components of research such as design, participant consent, data collection methods, and analysis techniques. However, as I reflect on this now, I recognize that my initial views and approach to research were too technically focused and rigid. Perhaps this was due to my education in biological science and background in applying the “scientific method” to quantitative research. Regardless, engaging in qualitative research, in a real-world setting, required that I embrace a more agile and flexible perspective and approach while at the same time doing my best to maintain enough structure to keep my research moving forward.

Qualitative research was messy, real, and unpredictable, and I quickly had to become okay with that. I was attempting to control the experiences around me, but the longer I engaged in this research, the more I realized that this was not realistic. Traditional project management practices (e.g., meeting agendas, project plans, and action items) were not working, because the research, as well as the Evaluative Inquiry topic itself, was dynamic. I had to give myself permission to embrace and use more of a hands-on and agile project management approach, and to adjust as needed throughout the

research process. Instead of attempting to control every aspect of research, I recognized that it was more important that I be a competent and clear communicator with regards to next steps and actions, flex plans based on the realities of conducting research in a work environment with participants that were very busy learning professionals, honor the dynamic nature of the very process I was studying and let the data and insights gathered from engaging in Evaluative Inquiry inform my next steps, and to remain open to the thoughts and suggestions of others. A lesson learned for me is that good research requires skillsets beyond the technical. As a practitioner, I tap into this insight to guide my personal practice. This experience has made me a better facilitator, listener, communicator, and leader.

In some ways I think conducting my research, particularly in Evaluative Inquiry, changed me as much as, or even more than, study participants. At our first EI meetings, I had to concentrate on not being an “expert” in the needs assessment process and not lecturing on the topic, but rather on listening, asking questions, and learning from participants. It is ironic in a sense that the qualities I was consciously working on becoming better at aligned with the social learning processes and phases of the EI model that I was studying. I realized I did not need to take on the role of expert; that was not the purpose of Evaluative Inquiry. I humbled myself, I gave myself permission to learn from others and to recognize that I did not have all the answers and was not an expert with regards to how participants experienced their needs assessment process. Part of the wonderful dynamic of EI is that it surfaces our own beliefs, values, assumptions, and knowledge; and here I was surfacing my own assumptions and thought patterns and

questioning, reflecting on, and challenging them and was growing and learning in the process. As a practitioner, I find myself remembering this important lesson when I lead teams either in a project capacity or individually through my role as a training manager. I can provide guidance and share my experiences, but I also remember to remain open to learning from others' thoughts, ideas, and perspectives such that they feel empowered. I had learned the importance of and how to model and apply socially just practices from both a researcher and a practitioner perspective.

As I reflect on my interaction with participants and the data itself, I recognize now that I was engaging in a form of social justice through my research and practice. Participants were empowered to own a process, because their voice was included in improving it. The "powers that be" were not saying that this is the way it must be, but rather that we want to hear your voice and incorporate your experience. Prior to this I really had not given much thought as to how my presenting already established tools and processes to learning managers could be perceived as disempowering because they were not involved in the process. I also had not thought about Evaluative Inquiry as promoting an environment conducive to qualities inherent to social justice such as challenging the status quo and advocating for voice of the "other." I was given the opportunity to engage in research and then to use it to challenge more established learning approaches within our company and as a result became more empowered myself. Where do I go from here? Empowerment, both modeling it and promoting it in others, certainly should not stop with the end of my dissertation.

I am in a position now where I have the education and experience to act as a change agent within the field of curriculum and instruction. As a professional and practitioner, I question more and empower others to do the same, to think differently and to challenge the way learning approaches are used within our organization. I feel a responsibility to engage in thought leadership around the topic of informal learning, with empowerment being one key theme. I have already shared some of my work at evaluation and learning conferences and have engaged in dialogue around how inquiry based, informal learning approaches such as EI excel at promoting learning, performance, and change through empowered people driving action. I plan to do more of this sharing as well as to establish more of a presence as a thought-leader on platforms such as LinkedIn.

I would be remiss if I were not to mention how I was shaped by others as I engaged in my dissertation research. With regards to participants, given one of my roles in this research was a participant-observer, I do not think it is unexpected that I changed and grew as a result of engaging with and collaborating with individuals that were not only research participants, but also my colleagues. Not only did I learn from their thoughts, ideas, and suggestions, which helped me to challenge and grow in my own practice, but I improved my working relationship with these people.

With regards to my collaboration with my doctoral chair, Dave, and my manager, Marlies, I am struggling to describe in only a few paragraphs, people that have become some of the most influential professionals and mentors in my lifetime. Dave provided me with the guidance I needed to realize success as a more competent and self-aware



researcher. He challenged me to reflect, to critically question, and to honor and trust my own voice. Much of my beginning work on articles came back with comments from Dave such as: I need to hear your voice, your voice is getting lost here, and here it is an example of your voice – more of this. I was depending too much on quoting the experts and presenting their ideas versus my own. Dave continued to remind me I had something important to contribute and gradually I began to develop a stronger sense of agency as a researcher and a scholar and to believe in my data and myself.

My manager, Marlies, was my biggest supporter from a professional and practitioner perspective. She successfully helped me to gain buy-in from departmental leadership, to select a business relevant topic, to address barriers (e.g., lack of time, de-prioritization of work) that could have prevented me from successfully conducting study activities. I was conducting research on top of a demanding full-time job and was stressed. She reminded me, Marie, one step at a time; eat the elephant one bite at a time! This advice helped me to shift my mindset and to not get overwhelmed by thinking about the entire dissertation process at one time but rather to think of it as smaller, more manageable steps. This experience continues to inform my professional life, as it has made me realize that although it is important to not lose sight of the goal, it is also important to confidently trust and move through the process.

My dissertation journey blended aspects of my identity – I was (am) a researcher and a practitioner. Nowhere did the interconnectedness of these identities become as readily apparent as when I tried to transition from writing my two empirical articles to writing my practitioner-based article. I had spent over a year preparing for and writing

my empirical articles. During this process I had strengthened my skills in coding data, analyzing themes, constructing my arguments and grounding them in the literature and the voice of my participants, and in writing in an academic and scholarly tone. I got so good at this academic writing that when I attempted to write for a practitioner-based audience, I failed. How could I forget how to write for practitioners when I also am a practitioner? Dave had informed me that this could happen, and it did. He encouraged me to revisit writing my article with Marlies as a guide, as someone to help reorient me to writing in a narrative style that was meaningful and applicable to practitioners. Once again Marlies became my anchor in the practical. I had to switch my writing style. I needed to use less theory and jargon, to reference the literature less, and did not need to present detailed research methods or data collection procedures.

As my formal dissertation journey comes to a close, I have given much thought to who I was then versus who I am now. No longer is the “technical nature of things” – the content, methods, processes, data collection methods, etc. – overemphasized in my practice, vision, and philosophy. Rather I now approach practice and research more holistically and from a more humanistic perspective. I am able to apply different lenses. I think about context, people, and impact at local and organizational levels. Additionally, I have a much greater interest in using research to initiate change and action and as a way to empower people. I find myself deeply caring for what people are saying to me beyond just thinking of them as a research subjects who are providing me with information that I need for technical reasons. I see myself as a catalyst for change and as having a responsibility to represent their voices. Ultimately, I realize that earning this doctoral

degree brings with it an opportunity and responsibility to give back. For me this journey has never been about obtaining a title, but rather about obtaining the knowledge and experience to move the field forward and to influence the next generation of researchers and practitioners within the curriculum and instruction field.

## APPENDIX A

### AGGREGATE SUMMARY OF FOUR EVALUATIVE INQUIRY PRINCIPLES

Principle(s)	Guidelines	Associated Process(es)
Principle 1: Connect to Organizational and Individual Struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize to key stakeholders (e.g., leaders, EI participants) that a key benefit of the EI process is to drive change around business needs or problems.</li> <li>• Identify business needs, goals, and initiatives from an individual and organizational perspective and select topic accordingly.</li> <li>• Select topic(s) that are relevant to EI participants and gives them a reason to engage in the EI process.</li> <li>• Use the focus the inquiry evaluation phase to further clarify “pain points” associated with organizational and individual struggle.</li> <li>• Use the focus the inquiry phase to develop mutual understanding of pain points.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning &amp; Design</li> <li>• Focus the Inquiry</li> </ul>
Principle 2: Build an Environment of Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create materials to communicate and educate participants on the EI process, including its benefits and impact.</li> <li>• Present materials in initial kickoff meeting to establish project credibility and value.</li> <li>• Explain the project “why” and create clear expectations of the outcomes and norms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning &amp; Design</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage, support, and model qualities associated with creating a safe environment (e.g., trust, risk-taking, non-judgement, active listening)</li> <li>• Use aspects of self-reflection to demonstrate authenticity in message(s).</li> <li>• Encourage open, respectful, and honest dialogue.</li> <li>• Ask everyone in the room for their perspectives.</li> <li>• Actively plan for and determine how to maintain momentum and engagement throughout the EI process.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prepare critical questions and think about examples to share and then use to prime stalled dialogue.</li> <li>○ Allow time for thought and responses – quiet is okay, do not talk right away.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus the Inquiry</li> <li>• Carrying Out the Inquiry</li> <li>• Applying Learning</li> </ul>

Principle(s)	Guidelines	Associated Process(es)
Principle 3: Success of Evaluative Inquiry Depends on a Democratic and Self-Aware Facilitator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remember that a key purpose of EI is to engage in dialogue that challenges thinking of all participants, including the EI facilitator.</li> <li>If you are the EI facilitator, reflect on your role as an open, dynamic, and empowering facilitator prior to leading EI working group meetings. Remember to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep an open mind.</li> <li>Check pre-conceived notions at the door; particularly if there is familiarity with the topic.</li> <li>Examine your own knowledge from multiple perspectives and angles.</li> <li>Allow others ideas to lead the discussion without influencing through your own voice.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus the Inquiry</li> <li>Carrying Out the Inquiry</li> <li>Applying Learning</li> </ul>
Principle 4: Add a Component of Self-Reflection to Deepen Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Debrief meetings foster meta-learning for Evaluative Inquiry team members</li> <li>Schedule debrief meetings for participants to reflect on their learning.</li> <li>Facilitators can use debrief meetings as an opportunity to identify gaps in learning or EI processes that can be addressed in future meetings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus the Inquiry</li> <li>Carrying Out the Inquiry</li> <li>Applying Learning</li> </ul>

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## VITA

Marie Elizabeth Paydon (aka Beth) is the daughter of Mark and Kathleen Paydon. She was born in Aurora, Illinois on February 18, 1975. She grew up in Plainfield, Illinois with her two siblings, Emilee and Tyler. She currently resides in Spring Grove, Illinois with her partner, Sandee, as well as her three rescue dogs, Houston (aka brown dog), Mocha (aka cha-mocha), and Wrigley (aka wiggles).

Marie attended elementary and high school in Oswego, Illinois. She graduated from Northern Illinois University in 1997 with a Bachelor of Science in Biology. In 2006, she earned a Master of Science in Instructional Design and Technology from Western Illinois University.

Marie has worked in corporate training within a global U.S. based organization for the past 14 years. In 2005, she began her career as an Instructional Designer. Since then she has grown as a learning professional by holding a variety of roles with increasing responsibility and leadership opportunities where she was responsible for the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of curriculum and learning programs for adult learners. In 2017, she accepted a leadership role and is currently a Senior Training Manager leading a team of instructional designers.

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